Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

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Beginning a new serial
By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

FIRST JULY NUMBER

SATAN'S GOLD

By HERBERT A. WOODBURY

LOVE GOT ON AT BUFFALO

by Gordon Kay

THE MOMENT she sank into the seat beside him in the crowded Club car Jackson's heart skipped a beat.

As the miles flew by, jeweled bits of information fell from her lips . . . she was an artist . . . she had been visiting her father in Buffalo. Yes, she was on her way back to her home in New York.

"One girl in a million," thought Jackson, remembering Manhattan's vastness. He hoped she wasn't married. When she confessed she wasn't, he sighed with relief.

"Not even engaged!" she laughed. "Not even 'going steady' with anyone."

As the train sped Eastward, Jackson found himself completely fascinated. He had always scoffed at the idea of love at first sight, but that was exactly what was happening to him! He felt that into his life had surged a new and wonderful force that he must cling to forever.

As he babbled on about himself, she drew back sharply now and then, with an air of annoyance as though she were bored. Perhaps he was too eager or was talking too much. Nevertheless, when he suggested dinner, she accepted and excused herself to freshen up.

"Over two hours with her before we reach New York," he thought happily as the train began to pull into Albany.

But a telegram poured ice-water on that little dream. The message read:

"Peterson flying Rio tomorrow. Stop off Albany today and contact him."

Stewart.

He silently cursed his luck. There was no way out; Peterson was too important. Crumpling the telegram in his hand, he scrambled for his things. There were only seconds to act.

Suddenly it flashed on him that he had learned neither the name nor address of this lovely girl who had swept him off his feet. Desperately he hurried through the aisles looking for her . . . in vain.

At last, as he raced along the platform, he had a glimpse of her thru the window, headed for the observation car. And there he caught up with her.

"Darling!" he blurted . . . then checked himself. "Your name! Your address! Your telephone number! You can't go out of my life like this!"

As the train started to move, she hastily plucked a card from her handbag, scribbled upon it, and, smiling quizzically, handed it to him. His eyes followed her figure in the twilight as long as they could, then looked down at the card. It read:

Mary Jones
New York City

* * *

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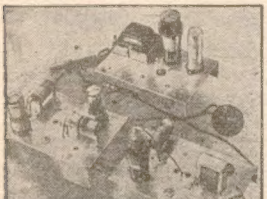

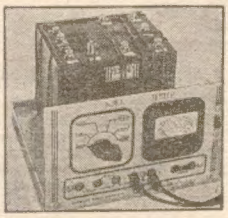

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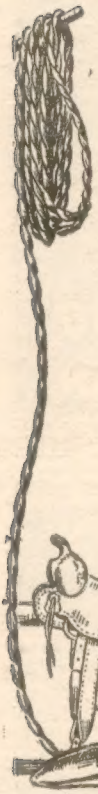

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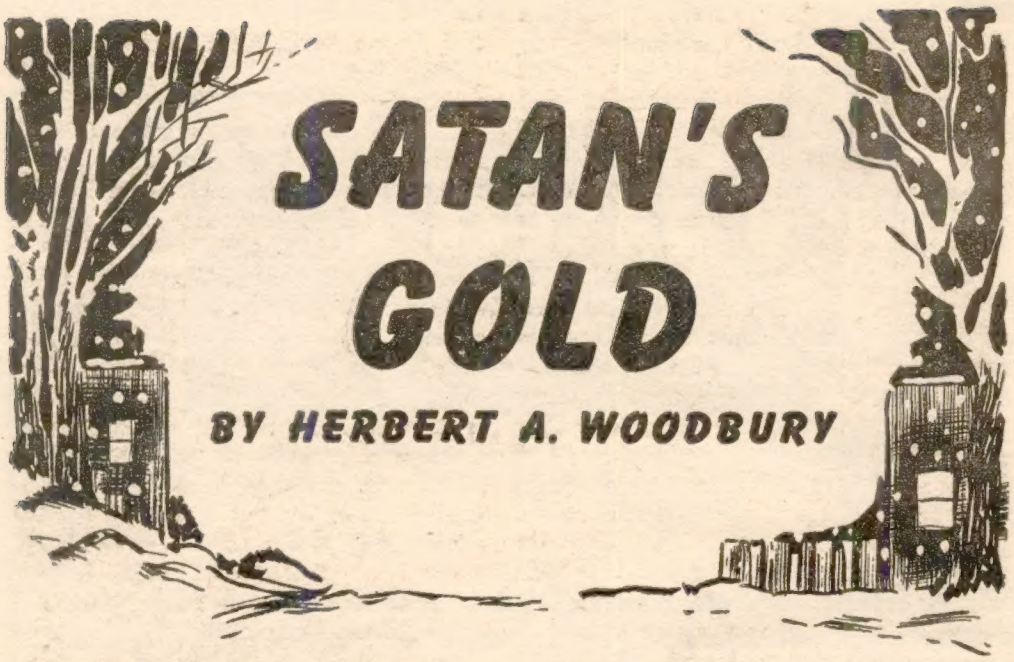


SATAN'S GOLD

BY HERBERT A. WOODBURY

THE STRONG arms and warm kiss of a stranger enmeshed Jody in a web of intrigue so tangled that only murder could cut the threads

THE dapper little drummer who had stepped off the train with the girl spoke to her in the darkness. "Sister," he declared, "they're really whoopin' it up here tonight, ain't they?"

Jody Wharton, with no desire to chat with the pale little salesman, averted her glance and looked off into the whirling emptiness. Through the blurred fuzziness of the snowflakes, a few lights twinkled across the tracks. From the lighted buildings, there rose a raucous bedlam of boisterous laughter, stomping feet and strident music.

"Yes siree!" repeated the drummer. "They're really whoopin' it up. Some of the big valley cow outfits must have shipped cattle from here today. And tonight they're really takin' Satan's Gulch apart."

"Satan's Gulch?" Jody whirled in swift alarm. "But I thought this was New Hope!"

The man smiled. "They call this district down by the tracks Satan's Gulch, ma'am. New Hope—the town—is half a mile up over the hill. You see, when Caleb Miller and his followers built New Hope, they wouldn't allow no saloons or gamblin' houses in their town. So the bars was all built down here by the depot and the stockyards. It's outside city limits."

Jody said, "Oh."

The little drummer took her in for a lingering moment. Kind of pretty, he thought, though personally he preferred 'em a little more on the plump side. Nice hair, nice big brown eyes, but too young. No use asking her to have a drink with him in the back room of the Railroad Bar.

"Well, good night, ma'am. I hope whoever's meetin' you don't keep you waitin' too long, because them cowhands are really on a bender. No telling what they'd do if they saw a pretty girl like you."

The man moved rapidly out of sight, through the storm. Jody Wharton tucked her chin deep into the warm fur collar of her shabby coat and stood there for a long thoughtful second. She wasn't afraid, she told herself. It took more than a harmless

"Come to Texas, polecat! Our cowboys will teach you manners!"

bunch of celebrating cowboys to frighten her. But she was a little bit worried, just the same.

Hadn't she made it plain enough to her Uncle Ned that she was arriving on Monday night? Her uncle had given her a choice of two dates. He had written that there was train service on Mondays or Thursdays, and she'd told him Monday.

It wasn't too cold in the soft April snow. Jody walked to the far end of the platform and stood listening. Somewhere in the distance she thought she heard trotting horses and a rig.

For possibly five minutes she concentrated upon trying to determine whether she really did or didn't hear hoof beats. And with her ears tuned for that sound only, she didn't hear the cat-like footsteps tiptoeing over the soft snow behind her.

She simply heard a sudden, booming, jovial, "Howdy, little sweetheart." And in the same instant, a pair of strong masculine arms seized her and spun her about! A tall, lank shape in a ridged Stetson and cowboy work togs caught her in a crushing bearhug, and two warm lips met her lips in a noisy, resounding kiss!

Exploding with wrath, Jody drove the sharp point of her one elbow into the cowboy's solar plexis, and with all her might, she kicked him in the shins.

The man's ardor left him in a flash. Rocking back in the pale lantern light, he blinked at Jody in incredulity and amazement. Jody looked into a bronzed, young face that was decent and clean-cut and compellingly handsome, and tears of exasperation flooded her eyes. Why, he wasn't even drunk. He hadn't any excuse at all!

"You—you polecat!" Jody flamed. "You just come to Texas, some time! Our cowboys are gentlemen! They'd fix a man like you down there!"

The big, bronzed cowboy had retreated from her, a good six feet. "Yes'm," he said meekly. He swallowed, apparently trying to say something, but if he intended to apologize, events made it impossible for him.

A curtained carriage had drawn up beside the station platform while Jody struggled in the cowpuncher's embrace. A young man in a sober black suit and hat leaped from the vehicle.

Jody had an instant's glimpse of a pale face, grim in righteous indignation. Just about as tall as the cowboy, just about as broad-shouldered and athletically built, the newcomer reached Jody's annoyer in a bound. He caught the cowboy by the scruff of his jacket. He spun him about and sent a smashing uppercut crashing to the point of the cowboy's chin.

The cowpuncher reeled back. Following up his advantage Jody's protector lunged in with a second mighty blow, but the cowboy was apparently made of stern stuff, himself. He gave ground twice to his attacker and then recovered from his shock in time to dig himself in solidly for the next exchange of blows. The man in blue denim didn't yield another inch. Planting himself toe to toe with the pale but mighty young man from the carriage, he began to slug it out, trading thudding blow for blow. Something breathless tugged at Jody as she watched the cowboy slowly gain the upper hand. All of a sudden, it was the young man in the black suit who was giving way. Perversely, Jody was thrilled at the cowboy's sheer might, and at the same time shocked at herself for being thrilled.

SHE HADN'T much chance to analyze her strange mixture of emotions, though. For the battle which had seemed to last hours, really lasted less than a minute. Evidently there had been two men in the curtained carriage—the impetuous younger man and a short, hunchbacked gnome with a brass star glinting on his leather vest. The ugly, wizened man walked up to the fray deliberately and drew his gun.

Jody screamed, but she might just as well have screamed at the snow to cease falling. The little gnome raised his left arm. With all the calm, cold efficiency of a skilled surgeon, he struck the cowboy a glancing blow across the side of his skull with the steel pistol barrel.

The bronzed cowboy dropped, pole-axed. Jody, in a wave of horror and pity, flung herself on rubbery knees to the puncher's

side. Two glazed blue eyes looked up at her in a completely blank expression of peacefulness. Blood trickling through heavy brown hair began to make a little puddle of bright scarlet in the white snow.

"But you've killed him!" Jody's voice trembled.

The twisted little peace officer shot her a malevolent glance. "You mind your business, lady."

The man in the black suit said soberly. "There was no call for your doing that, Lefty. I had him whipped, didn't I?"

Lefty spat and uttered a snort. "Sez you!"

Jody's protector dropped beside the girl. He hefted the cowboy's wrist, took the puncher's pulse. Then he darted Jody a faint smile. "I don't believe he's dead, Miss Wharton. On the contrary, I think he'll live to be tried and hanged."

Jody gasped, *"Hanged?* Just for kissing me?"

The pale young man shook his head. In a voice with a faint New England twang he said soberly, "No, Miss Wharton, not for kissing you. For murder."

He was on his feet again, addressing Lefty. "That's Ballard," he said, "the man I swore out my warrant against in White River yesterday. I told you about it, didn't I? How Sheriff Warren, over there, insulted me to my face? He told me he couldn't prevent my swearing out a warrant, but that he'd be damned if he was going to arrest a good cattleman merely for murdering a Millerite. Put handcuffs on him, Lefty. Take him over to the carriage. If they won't take him to jail in White River, we'll hold him in New Hope."

Lefty took a pair of manacles from a hip pocket and bent over the cowboy. Jody looked again into the puncher's clean, young face. Simultaneously the young man in black touched her arm.

"And now maybe we'd better get out of here in a hurry, Miss Wharton, before Ballard's outfit over there in the Gulch misses him and comes over here looking for him."

It was the first time Jody had noticed that he called her by name. For a brief second she scrutinized her avenger. Tall and well-built, he might have been handsome if he had smiled, but there was a dour, ascetic cast to his pale young face, and his thin mouth was humorless.

"You seem to know me," said Jody. "Am I supposed to know you?"

The man shook his head. "I guess not, at that. I'll explain it all later. Right now we'd better leave."

JODY listened. Approaching from whiskey row across the street, there came the sound of footsteps. A chorus of voices burst suddenly into barbershop harmony: "For she's a jolly good fellow. For she's—"

The young man quickly bent over, picked up Jody's bag, seized her arm. "Quick!" he cried curtly, and Jody felt herself being swept, willy-nilly toward the curtained carriage. "But my uncle," she protested. "Did Uncle Ned send you to meet me, and who are you?"

He simply bundled her bodily into the front seat of the waiting rig, into which Lefty had already dragged the senseless cowpuncher. Expertly, he gathered up the reins of as fine and expensive a team of matched black Hambletonian trotters as Jody had ever seen. Seizing the buggy whip, he flicked it over the animals.

From the station platform behind them, there rose a shout: "Hey, Doug! Katie! Where are you?"

Jody looked back into the fading spot of lantern light. Possibly a dozen cowpunchers had started to run futilely after them. Somebody's voice rose louder than the others. "Quick, boys! Let's get our horses! Doug and Katie's bein' kidnaped!"

"We'll take the river road," the young man said to Jody. "It's a little longer, but we'll probably shake off pursuit, if we go that way."

After a few moments, he turned to her. "I'm sorry. I took it for granted you recognized me. But you've heard of John Scott, of course."

Jody colored. "I'm afraid I haven't," she confessed.

"Your Uncle Ned never mentioned me in any of his letters?"

"I don't think so."

The man uttered a faint little sigh. "Don't

JAMES MILLER DOUG BALLARD JODY WHARTON

tell me that he never mentioned Caleb Miller either."

"Oh, yes," Jody smiled. "He's the prophet of you—you Millerites, isn't he?"

"The what?"

"Isn't he the prophet or the bishop of this new religion that you people—"

"I'm afraid, Miss Wharton," John Scott said reproachfully, "that you're as badly misinformed about us as most of our enemies. We Millerites aren't the members of some strange, new religious cult. And Caleb Miller isn't a prophet."

"No?" Jody asked.

"All of us, " John Scott continued, "are religious people, I guess. "Religious to the extent that we abhor violence and believe in brotherly love. But the Utopians Incorporated—that's our real name, not Millerites—isn't a cult. It's a corporation."

"I see," said Jody, although she didn't. "But I thought that you didn't believe in money, or something strange like that."

JOHN SCOTT managed a thin, tight little smile for her. "This is a cooperative enterprise. I wouldn't say that we don't believe in money. The company takes in, and spends, a great deal of money, buying farm machinery, purchasing those necessities of life that we colonists can neither raise nor manufacture. We simply haven't any use for money among one another. In return for our labor and work, the company pays each of us, in food and clothing and so forth, whatever he needs. Incidentally, I'm the treasurer."

"That's very interesting," Jody said, "but what about my uncle. Why didn't he meet me?"

John Scott paused for a moment. "Events," he said, "prevented Ned Wharton's getting to the train tonight. Under the circumstances, Caleb Miller suggested that I meet you."

The wind seemed to blow into the carriage more coldly. "Events?" Jody asked, in quick alarm.

Scott's voice colored itself with emotion. "Yesterday morning, Miss Wharton, Caleb Miller's son and two other young men found Ned Wharton dead, ambushed about half a mile from his little cabin, shot twice through the back!"

"Shot—" Jody managed to form the single word. She hadn't ever really known her Uncle Ned, but she felt grief and pity, none the less sincere. All her life, her Dad had talked of his brother Ned. Every Christmas and every birthday, her Uncle

CALEB MILLER JOHN SCOTT JAKE SHUMP

Ned had sent her a present, and within the past few weeks, her Uncle Ned had come into her life as a sort of rescuer.

Writing him at the time of her father's death, Jody had asked him, "Do you suppose there's any sort of job I could get in New Hope? Times are so terribly hard here in Texas just now." He had written her back a queer, almost mystically incoherent letter. Something about—striking it rich. Just how had he phrased it? But if much of his letter had been incomprehensible, his generous gesture had been plain and direct enough. He had sent Jody her ticket to come to New Hope to join him.

"You mean," Jody weakly found her voice at last, "that he was murdered?"

"Most treacherously and spitefully murdered, Miss Wharton."

"But why?"

Scott didn't answer her at once. He said finally, "Suppose you tell me what you know, Miss Wharton. And let me see how well it jibes with what I've been able to prove. Think for a minute and answer me carefully. Did your uncle mention anything odd in any of his recent letters?"

"Why, only," said Jody, "that he was rich . . ."

Scott's voice seemed startled. "Rich?"

"Why yes," said Jody, "I think that's what he said. Something about being rich, or striking it rich. Why?"

"But he didn't go into any details?"

"I've got his letter," said Jody. "I can look at it again. But I'm afraid that's all he said. And he said so many other half-religious things that I really didn't know what he meant. In some ways it almost seemed—"

"That he was using the word 'rich' figuratively, rather than literally?"

"Well—yes," Jody confessed. "You know—the way some people speak of the riches of heaven. Or the wealth of a better life. I mean, that's probably where I got my idea that Caleb Miller was a prophet. Uncle Ned spoke about being converted and all that. . . ."

THE CURTAINED carriage bounced on over the cold, frozen ruts. John Scott seemed to digest what she had told him before he said, "I think he must have been using the word figuratively, Miss Wharton. You remember, we were talking about it a minute ago. I told you that we Utopians didn't own private property or amass private fortunes. In other words, any

sudden wealth that might have come your uncle's way wouldn't have been his own in any case. It would have belonged to all of us."

"All of you? But I don't understand."

Scott sighed with the patience of a teacher dealing with an extraordinary dull pupil. "I've already explained it once, Miss Wharton. Didn't I say that none of us, as individuals, had any money, that our money went into a common fund?"

"But he did have money," Jody insisted. "He had enough, at any rate, to buy me a railroad ticket."

"Naturally, he had money enough for that. I gave him the money to buy your ticket."

"You?" gasped Jody.

And John Scott literally snorted his impatient exasperation with her. "Not me," he said. "Not me, as a person. I haven't any money, either. But I'm treasurer of the society—don't you see? We advance funds to any of our members who want to bring their families or their dependents out here."

Jody said, "I see."

Scott turned and asked Lefty, "They following us?"

Lefty said, "Not a sound since we left the depot."

Scott slackened the speed of his team a little and again looked at Jody. "What I meant, Miss Wharton, when I questioned you, wasn't anything like money or wealth. I simply meant—did your uncle happen to mention Doug Ballard or the Star Five Cattle Co. in any of his letters?"

"Ballard?"

"He didn't tell you that he had knocked Doug Ballard senseless in the post office in New Hope?"

It was a picture so incongruous that Jody couldn't imagine it! Why, her uncle was in his seventies! And she had seen the cowpuncher, Ballard, in action against Scott himself! But Jody caught the implication John Scott was making. What had Scott said to Lefty, just a little while earlier? He'd asked the peace officer to hold the cowpuncher for murder!

Sick horror engulfed Jody as she turned, stared into the rear seat and then whirled and regarded John Scott. But not half an hour ago, Doug Ballard had crushed her in his arms and kissed her! "You mean—Doug Ballard killed my uncle?"

THERE was a sudden pandemonium of shouts, and the bark of Lefty's gun, as a group of mounted men converged upon them from a cross road. Scott seized his buggy whip and laid it heavily upon his team. But two of the men had the fighting, pawing horses by their bridle reins. Even Lefty's gun ceased its barking after a first, single shot! It seemed to Jody in the blurred darkness that there must be at least twenty men in the gang that had ambushed them. Literally half a dozen brawny cowpunchers entered the halted carriage from each side.

Strong arms seized Lefty and dragged him out; Scott followed, battling every inch of the way.

A voice with a genial Texas drawl boomed, in Jody's face, "You all right, Katie?" And then, almost in the same breath, "My Gawd, boys, it ain't Katie!"

"But it's Doug, all right," cried somebody else. "They got Doug in here with handcuffs on him!"

Two men gently lifted the cowpuncher out of the rig. The genial Texas drawl said softly, "Maybe you better get out, too, ma'am. Till we get the horses quieted down."

Somebody shouted from the road, "He got away! Hit me in the belly and jumped that fence. After him, boys!"

Footsteps pounded. Somebody swore as he tangled himself up in barbed wire.

"Quit your cussin' in front of Katie."

"But she ain't Katie!"

And then abruptly, things happened at a slower tempo. In a shaken, trembling daze, Jody obeyed the order to get out of the swaying, jerking rig. One of the punchers at her side struck a match, lighting one of the carriage lamps. Now in the pale yellow glow of light, she saw Lefty, senseless on the ground, and the cowboy Doug Ballard. It must have been Scott, who had battled his way to freedom and jumped the fence. . . .

Someone produced a flask of brandy and was spilling most of it over Ballard's shirt

front. Somebody was frisking Lefty for the keys to the handcuffs. After a minute, Ballard sat up, sputtering, "Quit drownin' me. I'll take one sociable drink with you guys. But I'll be danged if I—"

He shook his head groggily. "But where in heck am I?" he demanded. "What's happenin'? Curly! What am I doin' here?"

The man with the Texas drawl said softly, "We outfoxed 'em, Doug! Trailed you far enough to see Scott was takin' you up the river road. Then we cut a couple o' Millerite sodbuster's fences and rode crost country."

Curly darted a glance at Lefty and a second glance at one of his own punchers, who was nursing a bullet-shattered arm. "Ran into a hotter reception than we counted on, Doug. Though we heard tales in the Gulch, tonight, remember? Big Jake Shump was tellin' us that old Caleb, up in New Hope, had got tired of Jake's boys hurrahin' his town, and had hired himself a rough, tough, two-gun town marshal."

JODY WHARTON still didn't move. In a sort of awed fascination, she watched the young man whom John Scott had named as the murderer of her uncle, get unsteadily to his feet. He shook his shoulders like a big mastiff coming out of water. He ran his hand up over the welt along his temple and massaged it firmly. Then his blue eyes, which had been fixed all the while upon her, smiled faintly.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, he said gently. "Seems like there's been a lot of folks hurt tonight on account of my dangfool hastiness. I dunno whether the boys have explained to you. We was expectin' to welcome my kid sister Katie home tonight. Scatterbrained little idiot must have missed her train in Lordsburg, like she done at Christmas."

The cowboy took a long, deep breath. "Anyway, I reckon you see what happened. You was standin' there in the dark with your back turned to me. And I jest figgered that anybody as slim and purty as that had to be Katie. So I—" He chuckled. "But I'm sorry."

Jody went on staring at him. He didn't know who she was, of course, but he had the gall to pretend that his only crime was kissing her. Abruptly, she remembered what John Scott had said to Lefty—"The sheriff in White River said he'd be damned if he was going to arrest a good cattleman merely for the murder of a Millerite sodbuster."

The bronzed young puncher seemed to wait for her to speak. When she didn't, he went on quietly. "Maybe I should have jest let Scott knock me down, like I let Ned Wharton, the other day."

"Ned Wharton?" cried Jody. "Then you did have a fight with him?"

The cowboy grinned at her. "You know him, huh? Yes'm, I had a fight with him. Run into him in the post office in New Hope. The pore old codger came at me, both fists swingin'. I'd have killed the old coot if I'd swung back, so I let myself collapse on the floor, ma'am, figgerin' he'd be gentleman enough not to stomp on me if I was down. And he was. He used to be a cowpuncher, savvy? Wasn't always one o' the wild followers of Caleb Miller."

The cowpuncher grinned again. "And if I'd used the same tactics with Scott, Lefty needn't have blackjacked me. I reckon. But the trouble was, ma'am, I wasn't too sure of how John Scott might act. Not bein' a cowman, he might have kicked me and stove my ribs in. So, instead of collapsin', and catchin' my breath to apologize to you, I jest kept sluggin', partly in self defense, and partly—" the blue eyes had the amazing effrontery to twinkle—"to impress you."

"Impress me?" shuddered Jody, shrinking back.

"Yes'm," said the cowboy dryly, "to impress you. I couldn't let a stranger get the wrong impression of this country, could I? Couldn't have some sweet, innocent, impressionable young gal thinkin' that the Millerite sodbusters around here was better men than the cowboys?"

There was a lusty shout from Ballard's own men. "That's the spirit, Doug."

The cowboy, in the same second took a step toward her. "But that still don't mean I'm any the less sincere now, Miss—whoever you are. Or that I ain't anxious to make amends. . . . Curly, quit pulverizin'

the town marshal and throw him back in the rig here. Whitie, call off the boys that's chasin' Scott."

"And now you, ma'am. I guess the team ain't goin' to run away. You hop back in there, and I'll drive you wherever you're goin'."

WHILE the cowboy had been chattering, Jody had managed to mantle herself with courage. She looked back into Doug Ballard's blue eyes in sudden stout resolve. He had been senseless while Scott had accused him of murder. Maybe he didn't even know that a warrant had been sworn against him! Or if he did know, he certainly didn't know that he had anything to fear from her! Why not, she asked herself, turn the tables on him? Let him take her into New Hope!

Making as good an imitation of a friendly smile as she could, Jody climbed back into the rig. "You can take me to New Hope," she said.

"I dunno, Doug," said Curly, heaving the town marshall in, "whether this makes sense or not. Ain't you the very hombre that tried to talk Jake Shump outa ridin' into New Hope, tonight? When he was tryin' to egg on everybody in the Buckhorn to go up there and hurrah the town?"

"That was different, Curly."

"What was different?" asked Curly. "Them Millerites hate us, don't they? Are they goin' to be any gladder to see me dumpin' their town marshal on the front steps of their jail than they would be to see Shump and his boys?"

Curly turned in the same breath and regarded Jody. "It's like this, ma'am," he explained. "I dunno which side you're on. For all I know, you may be a mail order bride comin' out here to marry one o' them Millerites. But the point I'm tryin' to make to my boss here, is—if he takes you into New Hope, tonight the trouble prob'ly ain't over. They hate us, and we hate them. We-uns and they-uns tangled last year at shippin' time. And if the gang of us rides into New Hope now, there'll be another riot!"

The man seemed to appeal to her. Jody said in quick inspiration, "Then why bring your whole outfit? Why advertise the fact that you're a bunch of cowmen? Why not just come in the closed rig?"

"The lady," said Doug Ballard, "has the right idea, Curly. Tell the boys to go home."

The old-timer snorted. "It's your funeral, pardner."

The cowboy laughed. "Funeral, nothin'! Ain't that right, Miss—Smith—Jones—Crabappletree? We got you on our side, ain't we? Where do you want to go?"

"To Caleb Millers, I guess," she answered.

"Huh!" snorted Curly, getting in back, "She's on our side, is she?"

"She will be," said Doug, "when she knows the whole story."

Jody turned to him. "You said you had a grudge against old Ned Wharton, Mr. Ballard. What kind of grudge?"

THE MAN relaxed against the seat cushion. "I been tryin' for seven years," he said, "to buy a certain piece of property from Ned Wharton, ma'am. He owned a little homestead at Peach Springs that would have straightened my boundaries if I could have got it. Old coot kept holdin' out for five times what it was worth. And then—you know what he finally did?"

"What?"

"He joined these here Millerites, ma'am. A gang that don't believe in the private ownership of property. I'd have paid him, any time he had sense enough to take it, two-three thousand dollars for his homestead. But he ends up by deedin' it, free of charge, to the Utopian Society.

"Naturally, I got a grudge against him. The old boy used to work for me, off and on. I know some of his private affairs. I happen to know that he's got a niece in Texas, for instance, that he's mighty fond of. And it kind of burned me up, ma'am. Why did he hand his property over to Caleb Miller, when the sensible thing was to will it some day to this gal? Wouldn't three thousand dollars have meant a lot, some day, to that gal?"

They were already approaching the town. Lights twinkled ahead of them through the falling snow. "So you took it upon your-

self," said Jody sarcastically, "to be the girl's champion?"

The cowboy laughed. "Not entirely, ma'am. I was furious at the old boy for givin' Miller the property that I wanted. Good and mad at him for being simple fool enough to let old Caleb hornswoggle him."

"Then you consider Caleb Miller a crook who cheated my—cheated Ned Wharton?"

The man snorted. "Now, look, ma'am," he said, "if you are a Millerite mail order bride, I don't want to get into any argument with you over old Caleb. He may be sincere enough—him and John Scott and all the rest of them. I'm just tryin' to give you my side of the affair. Old Ned Wharton was a friend of mine once, and the way I look at it, Caleb Miller took an unfair advantage of him."

Jody pondered it. What the cowboy told her seemed to confirm what Scott had told her about her uncle's wealth. If Ned Wharton had deeded his tiny homestead to the Utopian Society at the time that he had become a member of the organization, then obviously he must have died penniless. His reference to riches must have been figurative. For a tiny second, Jody wondered about herself. If her uncle had died without funds to will to her, how was she going to get home? What was she going to do, literally stranded now among strangers?

But she ought to be ashamed, she thought, to be worrying selfishly over herself. In a sudden rush of loyalty to old Ned Wharton, she rose to her uncle's defense.

"The whole affair Ned Wharton's business and not yours, Mr. Ballard. If he honestly felt that he was exchanging his earthly riches for—let's say, heavenly riches, wasn't that something for him to decide? Maybe Caleb Miller didn't cheat him. Maybe it was a fair bargain. Maybe he got back enough in peace of mind and security to make up for what he gave."

JODY'S voice broke. But that peace of mind and security hadn't lasted, she thought in sudden heartfelt grief. Yesterday morning, they had found her uncle dead, drygulched. Indigation welled up in the girl, and the words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. "I can't see why you had any reason to kill him, Mr. Ballard."

"Kill him?" gasped the cowboy.

Jody clenched both her fists and moved to the far edge of the carriage seat. They were in the town now, and she could jump if she had to.

"Didn't you," she demanded, "kill my uncle?"

The cowboy took his team round a corner into a dark side street. "Ma'am, I didn't even know he was dead. Your uncle, you said? You're the niece from Texas—Jody?"

He turned his team round another corner. They came through open iron gates into a sort of estate. The turrets and towers of a big, rambling brick castle loomed ahead of them. The cowboy drove up under a porte-cochère and halted his borrowed team.

"Miss Wharton," he said huskily, "I don't know where you got your idea that I killed him. But I'd like to talk to you. Not now, I guess. We're here at Caleb Miller's and you're tired, and you'll want to sleep on it. But could I see you tomorrow, in the lobby of the Utopia House in New Hope?"

"How are you going to meet me there?" asked Jody, "with a warrant out against you?"

"A warrant?"

"Don't you understand yet why Lefty put the handcuffs on you?"

She watched the tall, lank young cowboy get out of the carriage. He held out his hand to help her down. Jody was surprised at herself for accepting it. Hadn't it been her plan to bring him here to New Hope in order that she might denounce and betray him? Now she found that she wanted to see him again.

She heard him say, "Then where?"

Something compelled her to agree to meet him. "Where do you suggest?"

"You ride a horse, ma'am? Let's say, at your uncle's cabin. Nobody'll think it strange if you want to see where your uncle lived."

The man squeezed her hand, got back into the rig. "I'll wait," he said, "till they let you in." Jody crossed to the side door,

banged the heavy brass knocker. The door opened in a moment.

In the light behind it stood a tall old man in his sixties with flowing white hair. A beautifully sonorous voice invited her, "Come in, my dear. We've been waiting for you." Jody crossed the threshold, and the curtained carriage drove off.

JUST a moment before, when Doug Ballard had driven into Caleb Miller's estate, the iron gates of the drive had stood open. They were closed now and padlocked as the cowboy completed the circle. He halted his team, and a voice came to him from the shrubbery. "Put your hands up, Ballard. You, too, Curly. We've got rifles trained on you from both sides."

Doug didn't argue. "That you, Scott? Expectin' me, huh?"

"I figured Miss Wharton would bring you here. Light down and be quiet."

Quietly Doug did as he was bade. Out of the shrubbery, along with Scott, came a half-dozen men in the sober black costume of Millerites. When they had frisked Doug and Curly and tied their hands behind them, somebody unlocked the gates. Twenty minutes later, Doug and his veteran foreman faced each other in a narrow cell in the New Hope jail on lower Main Street.

Across the corridor from the larger, barred bull-pen rose the domineering voice of Jake Shump, a neighbor of Doug's in the White River Basin. "When I get out of here," Jake was intoning, "I'm going to burn their danged town down for 'em!"

Big, ugly Jake Shump was perhaps as responsible for his predicament as any man he could think of. In the beginning, during the first year that Caleb Miller and his followers had been building their town and establishing their homesteads, there had been no particular friction between sodbusters and cattlemen.

But a year ago, the railroad had built into Caleb Miller's prosperous little farming community. Stockyards had been erected by the depot, and the ranchers from the north end of the valley had been able to ship their herds for the first time from a point considerably closer to their ranches than Lordsburg, a hundred miles to the East. But the new stockyards had brought trouble along with their obvious advantages.

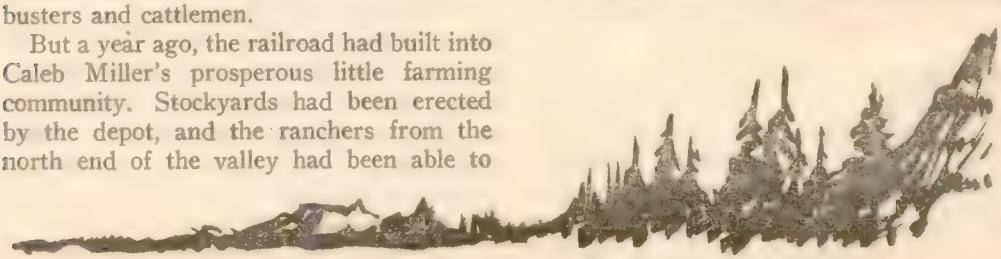
Jake's outfit, a year ago, had got roaring drunk in the Gulch and had ridden up to New Hope on a spree. Jake, furious at not being able to find a single gambling den or gilded honkytonk, had vented his spleen upon the religious community by leading his men in a most disgraceful hurrahing of the peaceful, quiet town. An aroused group of Millerites had managed to capture him, when he finally fell off his horse, senseless in the gutter. They had sentenced him to jail for ninety days.

AND JAKE had never forgiven them. Six months ago, when the ranchers had again shipped cattle from the Gulch, Jake had led an even larger delegation of rowdy, drunken riffraff into New Hope. Today Doug had heard Jake getting ready for still another vengeful assault on the peaceful little town.

Back there in the Railroad Bar, a few hours ago, Jake had been standing up in a chair, declaming, "So old Caleb's hired himself this rough, tough, two-gun town marshal, Lefty Stone, to keep you and me off his streets. What's he think he is? King? This is a free country, ain't it? Let's ride up there, all of us, and see jest how tough his new marshal is!"

Lefty, in the guise of bodyguard, had accompanied John Scott, when Scott had gone to the Gulch to meet Jody Wharton's train. But Jake and his boys had apparently run into somebody fairly tough. Doug couldn't resist calling out, "So they got you, in spite of all your big talk, huh, Jake?"

The big cattleman leered back at Doug



across the corridor. "Looks like they got you, too," he declared. "Ain't you the pure little boy who was tryin' to tell us in the bar tonight that if we didn't bother the Millerites, they wouldn't bother us? Maybe you'll listen to me now, Doug. I'm givin' it to you straight from the shoulder. If we cowmen don't do somethin' pretty quick to drive Caleb Miller out of here, he'll be runnin' the county in another year or two."

"And you'll lose your soft job of County Recorder," quipped Doug.

"Laugh," invited Jake. "Laugh all you want. You're mighty glad, ain't you, that Sheriff Warren's a cowman? And Judge Roberts. And the jury that'll try you. Supposin' they was all Millerites, cowboy? You'd be convicted jest as automatically as you're going to be acquitted, wouldn't you?"

Jake's voice stilled, and Doug Ballard pondered it thoughtfully for a little while. Plenty of what Jake said was true, he guessed. The battle lines were being drawn for a struggle for supremacy between the cattlemen and the Millerites. On the one side there was the prejudice and intolerance of men like Shump. On the other side—well, they had their hot-heads and bigots, too.

Doug scowled, shook his head. For the tiny moment, he thoughtfully decided that the battle which was getting nearer and nearer was needless. There weren't really any deep fundamental points of difference between the two groups which had to be decided in bloodshed and battered bodies. The whole temper of the quarrel was simply hysterical. But he failed to see how anyone at this point was going to calm things down.

Tired, his head aching, the cowboy lay back finally on his hard straw mattress and dozed off to sleep. He grinned once in his dreams as he recalled kissing Jody Wharton. He wondered whimsically what it would be like to kiss her again, when she wasn't battling like a wild cat. And then presently, Curly's voice awakened him.

"Get under your bed, pardner."

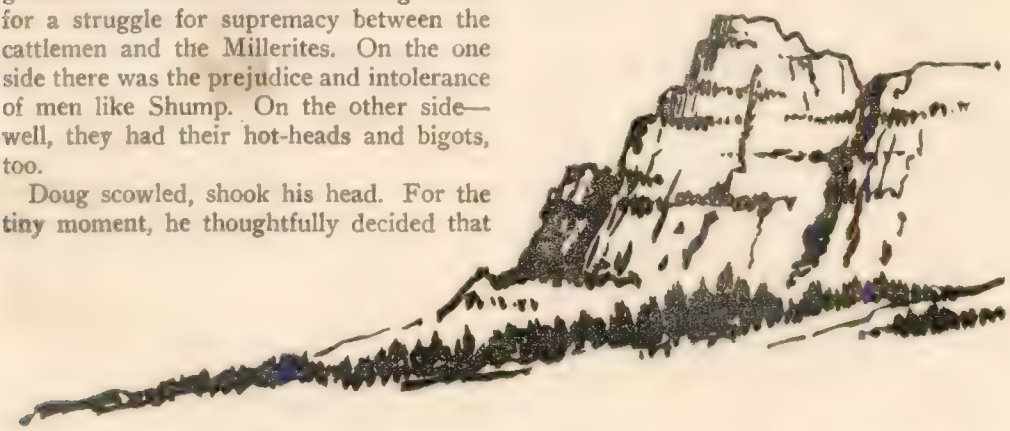
"Get under my—"

"In case the plaster falls from the ceiling," Curly told him. "The rest of Jake's outfit's outside. And our boys and Winslow's and Eaton's. They're gettin' ready to dynamite a hole in the wall."

THE MAN with the flowing white hair led Jody on into a comfortable, lavishly furnished living room. He introduced her to Bridget Graham, his drab little housekeeper, and said in a deep, rich voice, "And now, first of all, Miss Wharton, let me apologize for this room—and this house."

"Apologize for it?" gasped Jody, staring at the rich furnishings.

The man's pale blue eyes seemed to sadden. "It's so far from being in keeping with the doctrine that I preach," he said with a



sigh. "Maybe you know already how I detest pomp and luxury. But I happened to be in the East for a while this winter, on business for the Utopians. And when I returned, I found that my followers had built me this monstrosity, this castle."

Caleb Miller bade her to sit down. He sent Bridget to the kitchen for tea. In his earnest voice he offered Jody his sympathy at the death of her uncle.

"Naturally, your uncle left no estate, Miss Wharton—"

Jody nodded.

"He deeded what little worldly property

he owned to the Utopians when he joined our society, as all of us have done, you understand. As a matter of fact I made the greatest donation of all in the very beginning. While my followers put up pittances I donated a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars."

The pale blue eyes burned for the moment with the bright flame of the fanatic. Caleb Miller might disclaim being a prophet. But he looked like one, and he spoke like one.

"But the fact that your uncle died in poverty needn't disturb you. He had invited you out here to share his riches, and you can still share them, my dear. I can offer you membership in the Utopians and honorable employment. If you prefer, you will have the opportunity to marry one of our many fine young men. . . . You've already met John Scott."

Jody nodded. "Yes—I've met Mr. Scott."

"And I want you to meet my son," said the old man. "One of these days, I shall step aside. And my son James will watch over my followers. . . ."

The full, rich, deep voice stilled. Caleb Miller looked dreamily off into space. Bridget returned to the room with tea and bread and butter. And Jody asked abruptly, "Tell me, Mr. Miller, do you believe that a man named Doug Ballard killed my uncle?"

The pale blue eyes turned and bored into her. "Vengeance is the Lord's," said the old man. "I don't know, Miss Wharton. My son thinks so. John Scott thinks so. Ballard was your uncle's only enemy. And Ballard is a leader among the Godless heathen who have been persecuting us. But I'd rather let the Almighty judge him."

SOMEWHERE in the distance there was a low, dull boom. The man started in his chair. He said quietly, "We Utopians detest violence. . . ." Jody's forehead puckered. In her mind's eye, she saw Lefty brutally assaulting Doug Ballard. She made a mental note to ask Caleb Miller how he found the hiring of a man like Lefty compatible with his hatred of violence.

Footsteps pounded down the hall stairs, and a blond young man in his twenties burst into the room to cry, "Father!"

"Yes, son?"

"They've dynamited the jail! I looked out from the tower room! City Hall's on fire!"

Caleb Miller stood up. "Bring me my hat and coat, then, James."

The young man's eyes lighted. "Then you're going to do something? At last?"

Caleb Miller nodded. "Yes, James, I'm going to do something. I hope to get down there in time to restrain the more hot-tempered of my followers."

The old man left the room. His son turned and looked from Jody to Bridget. Then with a bound the young man crossed the room to a cabinet. Unlocking it with a key from his pocket, he took a gun-belt and a heavy .44 down from a shelf. He gave Bridget a look of defiance. "If he won't fight, I will," he said. "You hear me? I'm going to fight!"

James Miller hurled himself out of the room. The front door slammed. Jody felt Bridget's eyes upon her. "He's right," said the older woman slowly. "He's right, isn't he?"

"Who?" Jody asked uncertainly.

"The boy!" Bridget flamed. "Caleb's a fool! Goes around with his head in the clouds! Vengeance is the Lord's, is it? I wonder how he'd feel about vengeance, if James was hurt!"

The woman came on across the room and glared at Jody. "He keeps talking about retiring," she said. "He ought to step out of the way now, and let the boy take over. Either that, or they'll oust him at the next meeting of the shareholders. They're fed up with him, ma'am. Sick of him!"

"Who is?"

"The small rank and file, his followers. Keep the peace, he keeps preaching to them! Turn the other cheek! How can you keep the peace when you're being persecuted by men like Jake Shump? When a man like Ballard can kill your uncle and get away with it? There'd be more open revolt against Caleb right now, ma'am, if it wasn't for men like Scott."

Jody said nothing.

"Caleb don't know," said Bridget. "And

what he don't know don't hurt him! But Scott's not turning the other cheek! Scott's hired a tough town marshal to protect us during cattle shipping week! And he's drilled and organized a little band of vigilantes!"

Bridget walked to the window. "The town's afire," she said. "I'm going down."

Impulsively, Jody joined the older woman. Getting back into her shabby brown coat, she followed Bridget out into the night. As they came out of the side street into Main, a group of mounted men loped toward her, escaping apparently from a burst of rifle fire up the flame-lighted street. And Jody's heart stood still, for she recognized one of the fleeing group. She looked into the bronzed, clean-cut face of Doug Ballard!

For a tiny minute, Jody felt weak and sick. Her cowboy couldn't have ridden peacefully home after he had left her! He might deny in boyish amazement that he even knew that her Uncle Ned was dead! But this was hardly the deed of some young innocent. He must have been in the group which had set City Hall on fire.

Jody slowly followed Bridget on up the street. At the next corner Caleb Miller was handling the hose line from a hand-pumper, and vigorously haranguing his volunteer firemen. "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword! Let's have peace, my brothers."

Jody passed him. The mighty figure of John Scott was handling another hose line. And Jody was bound to confess that Scott's discourse moved her more than Caleb's.

Scott was addressing his little group of helpers. "I believe in peace as much as the next man. But there's a limit to the kind of peace that I'll endure."

Scott's little group cheered. "You wouldn't make a bad president of the Utopians yourself, man!"

But Scott's grim face betrayed no pleasure at the compliment. He said simply, "I don't aspire that high. Most of the society wants James Miller. And James Miller's good enough for me."

A little farther up the street, a group of women had organized a bucket brigade. Jody pitched in and joined it.

IT OCCURRED to Doug Ballard as he rolled out of bed the next morning that he had set no particular time for Jody Wharton to meet him at her uncle's cabin. But she could hardly get there from town much before noon, he guessed. He spent the forenoon attending to chores about his ranch yard—barking and snapping irritably at his men.

"What's eatin' you, cowboy?" Curly called to him. "You don't act like a man that's just escaped a noose round his neck."

"Noose!" snorted Doug.

"They'd have lynched you," Curly insisted. "I had it from Jake Shump. He heard Scott and the men that brought us in there, talkin' it over in the front room."

"How'd he hear 'em if we didn't hear 'em?"

"Well, he did," said Curly. "They was mad! They was fit to be tied! They was talkin' about massacrin' every cowman in the White River Basin."

"And now I know you're talkin' nonsense," said Doug.

"They're a dangerous bunch of religious fanatics, Doug," Curly insisted. "Shump says he sent a spy to one of their meetings. And they was discussin' it, then. How they'd drive us off our ranches and steal our cattle for themselves. They're crazy as bedbugs. They claim the Lord instructed 'em to do it."

Doug whirled on Curly in anger. "They're a bunch of poor, simple farmers, Curly, tryin' to earn an honest livin'. And if we'd only leave 'em alone— What's Shump's game, anyway? What's he think he's proving?"

Curly subsided. Still irritated, Doug wandered down to the corrals and saddled his big bay gelding, Sunflower. The weather had cleared. Most of the heavy snow of last night had already melted. There'd be good spring grass, this year, thought Doug. But he couldn't feel cheerful about it as he pointed Sunflower in the direction of Peach Springs. He was madder, he guessed, at himself than he was at Curly.

And yet what could a man have done last night, he wondered? It hadn't even occurred to him to remain in the jail after Jake's men had dynamited it, especially

with a warrant out against him. But the worst of it was he hadn't lifted a hand to prevent Jake and his men from setting fire to the building.

The miles blurred past Doug. The south hillsides, bare of their melting snow, were a yellow and orange and scarlet mass of gorgeous mariposa tulips. Somehow, the range had never looked prettier. But he didn't feel at ease with himself. He arrived finally at the rutted lane leading into old Ned Wharton's place. It was shut with a chain and a padlock, and a newly painted sign said, NO TRESPASSING.

Well, that meant that the girl hadn't passed through the gate either, he thought. He rode off into a little clump of algerita and waited. After an interval during which he wondered about the padlock and the sign, he saw a chestnut horse topped by a slim rider in levis coming toward him. He managed to grin as the girl drew near him. She was prettier in the bright April sun than she had been in last night's gloom.

BUT SHE wasn't much more cordial. She halted her horse a good dozen feet from him. "I didn't know whether you'd be here or not," she challenged him half-defiantly.

If Jake Shump had been filling Curly full of wild tales about the Millerites, he guessed that the thing could probably work both ways. No doubt somebody had had her on the carpet, telling her that the cowmen all had cloven hooves and forked tails.

"And I wasn't quite sure whether you'd be here either, ma'am." He nodded toward the padlocked gate. "Do I cut the fence?" he asked her.

"Cut—"

"Somebody," he said dryly, "apparently don't want us goin' into Ned's cabin, over there. Seems to me you've got every right to have a look-see. But it's up to you."

He watched her blink in surprise. She said, "Why, that's funny, isn't it?" And then she added, "But I guess we'd better respect the sign. It's not my property, you know."

"I know," Doug told her, "That's what we were talking about. Your uncle deeded it, three-four months ago, to the Utopian Society. But he went on livin' there. His personal effects must still be there."

Impulsively, he dismounted and approached the fence with a pair of wire-cutters. Before the girl could protest, he snipped each of the three strands of the fence. Folding the loose wire back, he remounted. A minute later Jody Wharton followed him through the opening.

"You see?" he said in faintly ironic triumph.

"See what?"

"How easy it is to get a bad reputation," he told her. "You didn't cut the fence. But you followed along with me when I cut it. I didn't blow up their jail, last night. Miss Wharton, nor set fire to the City Hall."

Jake's outfit got roaring drunk

Doug led the way through the oak brush and the manzanita. "Your uncle homesteaded here a long, long time ago, ma'am," he said. "If he'd stuck to his cattle ranchin' all these years, he might have died a wealthy man. But he was a funny, restless old codger. Always lookin' for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

"Gold?" asked Jody. "Real gold?"

"Both kinds," Doug told her. "Ned Wharton was a dreamer and mystic. Sometimes, he'd disappear and be gone for months. Up into the Navajo country and the painted desert. Oak Creek Canyon. The Tonto Rim. He loved scenery and beauty. But he used to talk about the other kind of gold, too. He panned a few nuggets out of the creek here from time to time. Always claimed there was indications of a whoppin' big vein, somewhere, back in one of these draws."

DOUG halted his pony as the brush thinned out. Ahead of them, on a little bluff overlooking a dry creek bed, sat a tumbledown shack of dry brown boards and tar-paper. Doug watched it for a long moment before approaching any closer.

Jody said suddenly, "I want to get something straight, Mr. Ballard. Who owns the mineral rights on this land?"

"The Millerites—now—I reckon."

"You mean, this isn't like some parts of

and rode hell-for-leather, hurrahing the peaceful little town

the West? Where anyone can come in and dig and make a claim?"

Doug shook his head. "It would be that way on parts of my ranch, where I simply rent the grazin' rights from the federal government. But not here. Your uncle homesteaded this section in here. Owned it in fee simple. Mineral rights and all."

"Then if he'd found gold—say, recently, within the past few weeks—it wouldn't have belonged to him, I guess. It would belong to the Utopia Society?"

"I guess so."

"And if anybody," Jody went on thoughtfully, "had murdered him, hoping to jump his claim, that person couldn't really do it, could he? Jump the claim, I mean."

"I don't see how he could."

"No matter who found the gold now," Jody pursued, "the gold itself would still belong to the Millerites?"

"That's right, I reckon. Why?"

Jody sighed. "Then it wouldn't have done anybody any good to have murdered my uncle for the gold. I mean, if there was gold. . . ."

She let it trail off. She had been through this line of argument last night with Scott in the buggy. He, too, had seemed to dispose of greed as a possible motive for her uncle's death.

Jody lapsed into thoughtful silence. Doug Ballard led the way into the clearing, where they tied their horses to the cabin's porch railing. They walked slowly around, curiously inspecting the precautions which someone had taken to close it up tight. Both its doors were padlocked. Its shuttered windows were nailed.

After a minute, Doug picked up a piece of scrap iron from a pile of refuse. Jody looked on in silence as the cowboy pried the nails out of one set of shutters. A minute later she followed the puncher over the sill into a cold, dark, musty room.

It had evidently been a comfortable room once. A couple of bright Navajo blankets adorned the floor. There was a big cobblestone fireplace at one end of the room. But it was a spot just now of tumbled confusion. Books had been pulled from a book case and piled helter-skelter on the floor. Every drawer had been removed from two big chests and a desk. On the stone hearth of the fireplace, there was a mountain of paper ashes.

Doug said, "Funny—"

Abruptly, a voice behind them said, "Put up your hands!"

Doug whirled. He had a gun at his hip, but he had the girl at his side. He didn't quite dare reach for his weapon. He simply blinked into the pale, beady eyes of Lefty Stone.

"Snoopin', huh?" said Lefty. "Lady, I got you both covered. Lift his gun out of his holster, and bring it over here to me!"

JODY didn't move for a second. The cowboy's voice at her elbow prodded her gently, "Better mind him, I reckon. Goldang me for bein' a fool. I should have sent you in here alone, and stayed outside on guard."

Jody Wharton came slowly to life. With the muzzle of Lefty's gun trained upon her, she gingerly plucked the cowboy's heavy .44 from the holster on his hip. Holding it by two fingers, she started toward Lefty. But if Lefty took her for some docile sodbuster's daughter, he was wrong!

Jody Wharton gave the gun a quick flip which sat it solidly in her hand! Her thumb fanned the hammer, and her finger squeezed the trigger. Flame leaped away from her—flame spat toward her. And then Doug leaped upon her from behind, knocking her to the floor, sheltering her body with his body. Doug had the gun and was blasting into the open window.

An instant later it was over. No more flame came from the window. Doug got up and darted to the opening. He fired once from the sill, scrambled outside and fired again. Jody followed him. She didn't know whether she'd hit Lefty, but she had at least put him to flight. Out of gun range, a black horse was crashing off down the draw.

The cowboy holstered his gun and turned to her. His voice shook a little. "Golly! That took—guts, ma'am."

Jody smiled wanly. "Or lack of common sense!" She watched two blue eyes study her in sheer, shining admiration.

"It makes me out a heel, though," he said.

"How?"

"For not doin' it myself."

Jody sniffed. "You couldn't. I probably couldn't, either, if I'd been a man. He didn't expect a girl to act like that."

Her voice broke suddenly. She didn't know why, but she was trembling. She felt the cowboy move close to her. He put his arm about her, steadied her. He said, "You're the kind of pardner a man likes, Jody." Then he said, "You want another look inside? I'll do it right, this time. I'll stay out here on guard."

Jody climbed back through the window again. But there really wasn't any more to be seen than what she and the cowboy had first observed—just the confusion and the burned papers. She was certain that some one had recently been through her uncle's cabin with a fine-toothed comb. Jody climbed back out into the sunlight.

Doug Ballard led up her pony. The girl mounted. "Could it be, do you suppose," she asked, "that somebody hoped to buy my uncle's property from the Millerites before they discovered what was on the property?"

But the cowboy shook his head. "I kind of doubt it, Jody. Nobody at any rate, who knew old Caleb very well. The Millerites jest don't operate that way. The railroad offered Caleb a whoppin' big price for some of the land between the depot and his town. Wanted to develop it with sidings and a grain elevator. But the old boy wouldn't part with a square inch. Said he was holdin' it in trust for future generations."

Doug added, "Some of his followers complained, I remember. The railroad money, divided between 'em, would have meant a dividend of about a hundred dollars cash for every settler in the valley. But the old boy told 'em to go climb a tree. Insisted that such a cash dividend was contrary to his principles. Nope, nobody'd ever in the world get old Caleb to sell anything."

He spurred his pony. They jogged on. After a while, Jody asked him, "But where are we going? This isn't the way I rode out here."

"I ain't takin' you back to New Hope," said the cowboy.

"That's all right," said Jody. "I can get back by myself."

He shook his head. "I don't mean that either. I jest meant—I don't want you goin' back there. Don't you see? You drove Lefty off. But he's going to report that he found you snoopin' through the cabin?"

"You mean you think I'd be in danger?"

"Don't you?"

7

SOMETHING stubborn welled up in Jody. She had to go back to New Hope! Among other things, she wanted to reread her uncle's last letter. She had meant to have another look at it last night. But in the excitement of the jail break and fire, she had forgotten. "But won't old Caleb Miller be terribly worried if I don't come back?"

"Let him be worried."

"Won't he think you've kidnaped me?"

"Let him think that, too."

Jody shook her head. "If I'm in danger," she said slowly, "it's not from Caleb Miller. I—I could almost swear to that. He's kind of peculiar. I'll admit. I don't think I understand him very well, or that I'd ever care to be one of his followers. But I think he's sincere."

"And what's bein' sincere got to do with it?" Doug asked. "Maybe he killed your uncle, because he was so sincere."

"Oh, no!" gasped Jody.

The cowboy gave her a funny, wry little glance. "I ain't sayin' it's so," he said. "It's jest a theory, and it's a wild one. But the railroad deal just got me to thinkin'—supposin' your uncle did discover gold, Jody. Tons and tons of it. Bein' a good Millerite, he took his news to Caleb. Good news—he had riches for the whole colony. Not jest a hundred dollars apiece for everybody, but if his strike was a real bonanza, maybe thousands of dollars apiece for everybody!"

The cowboy's eyes were earnest, worried. "And what was old Caleb's natural reaction to anything like that? Does he want his followers all rollin' in sudden wealth? If he don't think an extra hundred dollars is good for 'em, he certainly

don't think that thousands and thousands is good for 'em. So, we'll say he's sincere. He actually believes it ain't good for his followers to find out that your uncle's struck it rich for all of 'em. And to keep your uncle from tellin' 'em—stirrin' 'em up and gettin' 'em discontented—"

"He murdered him?" asked Jody in a still, small voice.

"Couldn't he have?"

Jody let a full half-mile blur past them while she pondered it. But it was utterly wild and fantastic. She shook her head. "I'm afraid not. No, I'm leaving you here. I'm riding back to New Hope."

The cowboy's face darkened. "Then you make it kind of embarrassin' for me, I'm afraid."

"How?"

He grinned at her. "I don't like kidnapin' you. It ain't hardly the beginnin' of a beautiful friendship, is it? But I guess I'll have to."

Jody simply stared at him. "You mean—"

"What I said, Jody. If I got to hog-tie you, I'm takin' you home with me."

HE SAID it lightly, but there was a vibrant urgency in his voice. Jody stared at him, swallowed, stared again. He meant it; no doubt of that! His hand was already untying the rope on his saddle! But this was carrying chivalry to a pretty absurd degree. Did he think she was some helpless creature who had to be told to come in out of the rain? Hadn't he just complimented her a minute ago on the way she handled Lefty?

Jody felt a sudden wave of doubt. She had accepted his simple statement that he hadn't killed her uncle. She had accepted his mere declaration that he hadn't been one of the ruffians who had set fire to the New Hope jail. But what, actually, did she know about him? Just that he, too, seemed sincere. But as he had just taken the trouble to point out to her—sincerity alone didn't mean anything. Maybe he had been sincere in wanting her uncle's ranch! And was sincerely furious that the Millerites had got it!

Jody Wharton managed what she hoped was an obedient little smile. She'd bide her time and get away later. She said, "Well, in that case there's no use arguing, is there?"

The cowboy's expression softened. "Not much, Jody."

She jogged on at his side. After a while, a big sprawling adobe ranch house and the rusted galvanized roofs of a cluster of sheds loomed in a little valley below them.

They came down into a barnyard, redolent with the odors of corrals and horses and hay, and for the minute a different set of doubts assailed Jody. Somehow, there was something mighty compelling about the smell of a ranch. Doug's place with its big cottonwood trees was beautiful. The simple living room of the house with its Indian blankets and baskets and pottery was comfortable and cozy. Maybe it would be nice to be a helpless little thing, and just stay here and forget. . . .

The sun set, scarlet and gold behind a purple ridge of hills. Mrs. Madison, Curly's wife, came up from her own cabin and moved into the big ranch house. "To be your chaperone," she told Jody. A triangle tinkled, and about a dozen cowboys wandered into Doug's big kitchen. Everyone sat down at one long, heavily laden table. One of the boys wanted to know whether Doug had heard from Katie, and he said that he had. A telegram from Lordsburg, saying that she was going to stay on the rest of that week with an aunt there. Some-

body said, "Maybe it's a good thing if there's going to be trouble."

Jody asked, "What trouble?"

"Jake Shump was sayin' in the Gulch this afternoon that old Caleb and his son had a row, this morning. James walked out to become the leader of a little group that are callin' themselves the 'Avengin' Angels.' And the Angels, I reckon, are goin' to attack us."

BUT CALEB himself wants peace?" Jody asked.

"He says he does."

"And you want peace too, don't you?"

Curly played with his fork. "I dunno, ma'am. The Millerites have been gettin' too big for their breetches. Maybe we'd better knock 'em down now, while we're still strong enough."

"Or maybe," said Jody, "if you each made an honest effort to understand the other side a little bit better, you'd find that you didn't have any reason to be suspicious and afraid of each other. You believe in different things, I guess. You've got different philosophies of life. But it seems to me, the White River Basin ought to be big enough for both of you."

She appealed to Doug. "Maybe if you could all sit down together and talk things over in a friendly way, there wouldn't be anything at all for you and them to fight about."

Doug smiled at her. "You're cute."

"And you make me so doggoned spitting mad!" said Jody.

The cowboy grinned. "You play chess, Jody? Checkers? Dominoes? Let's not fight. Come on."

About an hour after dark, while they were all still in the kitchen, hoofbeats thundered into the ranch yard, heavy steps sounded on the porch, and big ugly Jake Shump burst in upon them. "Come on, boys," Jake ordered, "we're gettin' a posse together. The Avengin' Angels have struck. Burnt the Todd place! We got the trails blocked, leadin' back to New Hope. And we're out to round 'em up."

Jody watched Doug rise quickly. He came round and squeezed her hand. "I'll be back," he said.

She looked up at him. "Doug, promise me—"

He nodded. "We won't lynch anybody. But if we can arrest some of them, maybe we can get to the bottom of this. I been thinkin'—"

He led his outfit out into the night. Jody sat in the kitchen alone, listening to the departing hoofbeats. Mrs. Madison was upstairs arranging the room in which Jody was to sleep. There was nobody to stop her. Jody walked out into the barnyard. The departing horde had left a pony or two in the corrals. Expertly, Jody captured a plump little bay gelding with a bridle. Nobody interfered with her as she saddled the animal in the dark ranch yard

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Coming in the next issue

STRANGERS IN TOPOK

A Moving Novel of Powerful Range Forces

By JAMES W. ROUTH

Tingling in triumph, she rode out Doug's lane to the highway. So he'd kidnaped her, had he? She felt very independent and sure of herself as she pointed her mount toward New Hope!

JAMES MILLER was frightened, now that the ugly deed was done. The Todd barn, crammed with hay to the rafters, had gone up in a flash. Even before he and Lefty and the couple of hard-bitten companions whom Lefty had brought along with him, had ridden a couple of hundred yards, the scene behind them had been bright as day. James Miller had looked back to see a couple of mute, horror-stricken women standing in the ranch yard, and the vivid memory made him feel weak.

All of a sudden he didn't know whether he cared for this role of Avenging Angel. Last night he had felt differently. When Jake Shump's outfit had hurrahed New Hope earlier in the evening, and when the remnants of Jake's outfit had returned with reenforcements to liberate Jake and set fire to City Hall, everything that was manly within him had been stirred. He had tried, these past few weeks, not to listen to the flattery of John Scott and a little handful of other Millerites who had wanted to oust his father and make him president of the Utopia Society in Caleb's place. He had felt that he lacked his father's dynamic qualities of leadership. Deep in his soul, he had known that he wasn't the man for the job. Last night, though, it had been easy enough to become disgusted with his father.

He had fought like an inspired demon in the battle around the jail. Even this morning, it had been easy enough for him to walk out of his father's house to a secret meeting. He had agreed to lead those of the Millerites who wanted a more aggressive handling of the situation. A sort of grim righteousness had filled him. It was time for his bumbling old father to step out of the way. Time for a lot of changes in the colony. What was so wrong with money and a bank account? As long as old Caleb controlled the purse strings of the colony, he was virtual dictator, and they were all simply his slaves!

But James Miller confessed to himself that now he suddenly didn't know. He darted a harried glance at Lefty and the two others in the faint light of the camp fire which Lefty had lighted in the mouth of the cave. He said, "You think that's wise? Lightin' a fire? Won't they see it and trail us here?"

Lefty snorted, "They won't see it."

He asked weakly, "But how are we going to get out of here? This cave comes to a dead end. Won't they track us here by daylight?"

Lefty sneered at him. "Yellow, huh, kid?"

Lefty rose from his squat position by the fire. He motioned to the pair with him, neither one of whom the kid had ever seen before that night. "Let's do a little explorin' back here," he said. "Let's see, for the kid's sake, if there's another way out." Lighting matches, Lefty and his two pals disappeared into the thick blackness.

James Miller sat by the fire alone. No, he told himself, he didn't want to be president of the Utopians. And he didn't want to be an Avenging Angel. He wished he hadn't set fire to the Todd barn. He wished he were home, safe.

The long moments dragged by. Lefty and his pals didn't return. After a while it seemed to the kid that he heard hoofbeats and men's voices in the night. He hastily smothered the fire with dirt. But they wouldn't find him here, he told himself. How could they, unless someone had told them?

SHUMP led off in a straight line that night, after Doug and Curly and the boys from the Ballard ranch had joined him. "You call this trailin' somebody, Jake?" he asked. "Danged if you don't act like you knowed jest where you was goin'."

Jake laughed. "I got a hunch," he said. "The Todds said he started toward Cedar Pass."

"He?"

"Shore. The varmint we're after. James Miller."

"But you told me a minute ago there was a gang"

"There was," said Jake, "is, I mean. But James was leadin' it. So I says to myself, Cedar Pass, huh? There's an old Injun cave up there in Snake Canyon and I'll bet he's holed up there."

They swept on. Jake didn't once dismount from his horse to look for sign. Riding halfway to the pass, they took a steep cattle trail down into Snake Canyon. For a minute the light of a campfire beckoned them. Then it went out. Jake led his posse through the tangle of trees to the cave's entrance. Unholstering his gun, Jake lighted down from his horse.

"You wait here," he said with an air of bravado. "I'm goin' in there and drag the dirty skunk out."

Doug Ballard swung down beside Jake. "I'm goin' in there with you, pardner."

"It ain't necessary."

"You seem mighty shore of yourself."

"Meanin' what?" Jake challenged him.

"Why, jest what I said. Ain't it kind of a damned fool stunt? It's lighter here than it is in there. You'll be framed for a minute in the entrance. Couldn't a group of desperate men simply mow you down? Unless—"

Jake had turned, and his gun was in Doug's belly. "Unless what, pardner?"

Doug seized the gun barrel and slugged with his free fist. "Unless you and somebody are springin' a trap, Jake!" His blow to the solar plexis spilled big Jake. He covered Jake with Jake's weapon and the circle of Jake's followers with his own gun.

He spoke curtly to Curly. "I ain't got all of it quite figured yet," he said. "But I'm playin' a hunch now. Keep Jake and his gang covered, while I—"

He dodged off through the brush and approached the cave's portal at an angle. He called, "Miller." Nobody answered him, but in the glow of a half-extinguished fire, he saw the kid, crouched in the shadows, gun on his knee. He called again, "You'd better come out, kid. I can guarantee you a square deal."

The kid still didn't speak. He simply raised his gun and fired. Doug didn't blast back. He said softly, "It's no use, Miller. They got you framed. That wasn't a bullet that hit the wall here. It was somethin' soft. You're shootin' blanks. Break your gun and see if you ain't shootin' blanks."

The shadowy shape by the fire cried, "Blanks?"

See for yourself—" Doug started to say, but he didn't finish. Somewhere back in the dim recesses of the cave, a loose stone rolled, and another gun, which Doug hadn't figured on, exploded. James Miller slumped and pitched forward across the coals of the dying campfire. Doug squeezed his trigger twice, and someone back in the shadows screamed.

Doug waited. After a minute, he poked his hat on a stick round the entrance. Nothing happened. Curly and Mike from his outfit joined him, and Doug cautiously wormed his way inside the cave. He passed the dead body of the kid. Maybe a dozen feet behind him he came upon the dead body of Lefty. Curly stared at Doug in the flare of a lighted match. Doug slowly sucked in his breath. "My hunch was not far off," he said. "And we've got Jake Shump. Come on, Curly. We're takin' him to White River tonight, and turnin' him over to Sheriff Warren."

JODY rode in through the open iron gates of the Miller estate at about eleven-thirty that night. Bridget let her in and as they walked down the long hall she heard John Scott's voice.

"And that's the way it is, Caleb. Whether you like it or not, the majority of your followers are sick and tired of being your slaves. It was all right in the beginning, maybe, when the colony was poor and struggling and there wasn't any cash surplus to divide. But some of them are asking questions now. Why should you live here on this luxurious estate? While they—"

Jody paused in the doorway. Old Caleb was on his feet, his face crimson. "But that's not true," he accused Scott. "I don't want to live here, and you know it. And the only reason I have gone on living here is because you told me—you yourself told me, John Scott—that I'd hurt their feelings if I refused to accept their gift, when I returned from the East."

The man broke off at the sight of Jody.

Scott subsided too. There was a second of embarrassed silence.

Then Scott broke the tension. "You've worried us, Miss Wharton," he said soberly. "I came round this afternoon with a rig to take you driving. I'd hoped to show you our colony by daylight. But you'd gone. Where?"

"I happened to have ridden out to my Uncle Ned Wharton's cabin. Shouldn't I?"

Old Caleb Miller gasped. "You rode—where?"

She repeated it. And incredulously watched the old patriarch turn crimson. "But you had no right, Miss Wharton! And just what did you expect to find out at your Uncle Ned's?"

She retreated a half-step as the pale blue eyes bored into her. "Why, nothing," she said. "I didn't expect to find anything. I simply—"

Scott moved toward her and stood beside her. "You're frightening her, Caleb," he said. "Why shouldn't she ride out there, or any place else she wanted to ride? This is a free country, isn't it?" And then he added, anger suddenly edging his own voice. "Or is it? Maybe you claim to be a prophet, after all! Maybe you don't want to resign and let James take over in your place?"

"Maybe I don't want to. Some day, perhaps, when James is older and wiser, but not yet." He turned from Scott to Jody. "I'm sorry if I frightened you. I hadn't meant to. For the minute you frightened me. But you found nothing at your uncle's?"

She had found Lefty and a gun, Jody recalled. But she said, "Nothing."

Old Caleb smiled at her. "Then good night, my dear."

"Good night," said Jody.

Neither man followed her into the hall. Starting up the stairs, she heard them resume their argument. A minute later, she closed her bedroom door. Quickly, she crossed to her battered suitcase. Dropping to one knee, she opened it and fumbled through it for her Uncle Ned's letter. But the letter wasn't there! She searched a second time without success.

SHE HAD no idea how long she sat on the edge of her bed, trying to think. Someone had burned her uncle's papers out at his cabin! Someone had stolen her uncle's last letter to her! Could Doug be right? Had her uncle found the vein of gold which he had claimed lay back in one of the little draws on his ranch? Had a half-insane old man murdered him to suppress all news of the discovery, and then burned his papers and stolen his letter lest he should have left some written hint?

The big, empty house seemed to creak. Jody didn't undress. Blowing out the light, she moved over to an armchair and sat down. Maybe an hour later, she heard Scott say good night downstairs. Caleb Miller came up the front steps and into his own room. Jody had made her decision. When it got quieter, she was going back to Doug's.

She was making a bundle of some of the things in her suitcase when a knock sounded faintly on her door. From the hall came a man's tense whisper, "May I come in, Miss Wharton?"

The unlocked door opened before she could speak, and John Scott entered from the dim hall. He didn't cross the room. He said simply, "Don't let me frighten you, Miss Jody. But I came back because something's been bothering me ever since Caleb flared up at you downstairs. If you don't mind, I want to read your uncle's last letter to you."

"But somebody has stolen it."

"And that's why you're packing, aren't you?"

"And if I am?"

"I think you're very wise."

He still didn't come toward her. He half-opened the door and peered out into the hall, listening, and then looked back at her. "I don't know how much you know," he said gravely. "I purposely told you very little last night. I didn't want to give the impression that there was discord and dissension within the ranks of the Utopia Society. But you overheard Caleb and me, tonight, I guess—"

"You were asking him to resign," said Jody.

Scott listened again at the door before he went on. "That's right, Miss Jody. I accused him of treating his followers like slaves. Power's gone to his head like wine, these past few months. He didn't claim in the beginning to be a prophet. But now, I don't know."

"But what's that got to do with my uncle's letter?"

"You haven't guessed?"

"Why, only—"

She stopped, and Scott took it up for her. "I know," he sympathized. "It's difficult to put such an accusation into words, isn't it? But a certain type of criminal insanity and religious fervor often goes together, Miss Wharton. Let me say it, if you're afraid to say it. Suppose your uncle did find gold? And brought the news to Caleb? And Caleb believed that it was his holy mission to keep all of us poor? I've heard him say it a thousand times! There have been colonies like this before. And if they survived their first year or two of hardships, then prosperity always ruined them. Whenever the colony became wealthy, it went to pieces."

Jody said in a still, small voice, "That's what Doug Ballard suggested."

He pounced eagerly on her statement. "You say Ballard thinks the same thing? Tell me exactly! Just what does Ballard think?"

Haltingly, Jody told him. But Lefty—she kept thinking—where did Lefty fit in? Hadn't Bridget told her that Lefty was John Scott's own employee?

Scott's voice was edged with triumph, "Then I think that we had better confer with Ballard at once. There's been a war brewing here, Miss Jody. Maybe it needn't flare up, after all. Maybe if we can edge old Caleb out of his job and bring him to justice, then we could put young James in his place and come to peace with the cattlemen. How about it? Shall we drive out and call on Ballard now?"

Jody hesitated but it would be much easier to go with John Scott than alone at this time of night. She finished making the bundle of her small treasures. After a minute she tiptoed down the silent hall with John Scott. They went out the back door, and Jody climbed into his rig.

IT WAS dawn the next day, before Doug Ballard got back to his ranch. In the long ride home from White River where he had left Jake Shump, he had done a little thinking. There had been an open split, twenty-four hours ago, within the ranks of the Millerite organization. Old Caleb's son, James, had led the dissenters. James had made himself a candidate for the presidency of the Utopia Society, and within twelve hours, the boy had been treacherously framed and murdered!

Doug shuddered. He had painted to Jody the possibility of a criminally insane old man at the helm of the Millerite colony. And now the thought both horrified and fascinated him! Would Miller's insane lust for power have carried him this far—to the cold-blooded murder of his only son? Well, why not, if the boy threatened to take his power from him?

But there were a hundred loose ends which he wanted to discuss with Jody Wharton. She was cool and level-headed, and maybe she could suggest to him the role which Jake Shump had played in the sordid little drama. For Jake, himself, had carefully guarded his silence.

Dog-tired, Doug dismounted by the house hitching rail. And Curly's wife gave him the news as he came up the path. "Walked out on you, she did, Doug. I was upstairs, tidyin' her room, and when I came down, she'd high-tailed it."

Weariness left Doug Ballard in a rush. He turned and rushed back to the barnyard. Saddling a fresh horse, he flung himself into the saddle. He stopped at the Eaton place for a second fresh mount and at the Gulch for a third. He roared into New Hope at nine. And when a pale woman named Bridget Graham tried to bar him from Caleb Miller's house, he thrust her out of the way and stalked on into the living room.

But she was telling him the truth. "Caleb ain't here, and neither's Miss Wharton. Caleb had word ten minutes ago that his boy was dead, and he took a gun and

stalked out of here. Vengeance is the Lord's, is it? I always said he'd feel different if anything ever happened to James."

"And Jody?" cried Doug.

"The girl wasn't here for breakfast this morning, and Caleb said—"

"What did he say?"

The woman colored and looked at Doug defiantly. "He said if he'd scared her last night, he was sorry. He said he'd debated it all night long, and he was going to talk to her this morning about it. He was going to explain what he'd done with her uncle, and he hoped he could make her understand why."

"Done with her uncle?"

"That's what he said! Ned Wharton was here two nights before he was killed. And him and Caleb argued up into the wee, small hours about something. So Caleb was going to tell her this morning, what they'd argued about, I guess. But she'd gone. And then like I said—"

But Doug Ballard listened to no more. He forced the unwilling woman to take him on a room by room tour of the whole, vast house And then, with failing heart, he inspected the big stable behind the house. But she wasn't anywhere. She had left a half-filled suitcase and vanished.

Frightened, knowing for the first time in his life what it was to feel terror, Doug galloped back to the center of town. He tied his pony in front of the red brick building of the Utopia Society. And as he crossed the plank sidewalk, he heard the little knot of Millerites lounging in the doorway, talking.

"But who's going to lead us, now that James is dead?" some one asked.

"Caleb, maybe," said someone else. "We've prospered under Caleb, ain't we?"

But instantly there were dissident voices. "Sure, Caleb," cried someone sarcastically. "That's the way he planned it! Had his son murdered, so we'd keep him on as president!"

"Murdered?"

"I got it straight from a cowboy in the Gulch, this morning. Caleb had his son framed! Shump apparently knowed jest where to look for him! And the bullets in the kid's gun was blanks, loaded with bee's wax!"

DOUG swept on past the voices. Hand on the bone grip of his gun, he strode down the long corridor and flung open the door of John Scott's office. A pale youth at a counting table told him that Scott wasn't there. "Dashed out of here twenty minutes ago, like he was going to a fire."

Helplessly, Doug descended the steps again. On the off-chance that he might find Scott at his home, he asked a sodbuster on the street to direct him to the house where the Utopian's treasurer lived. But no one answered the door. He stood on the porch for a long minute looking through the window into a living room almost as lavish as old Caleb's. Then, with the panic growing within him, he walked back to his tethered pony.

One frail hope came to him as he remounted. His trail and her trail might have crossed this morning. Maybe she had been on her way back to his ranch, while he had been riding to New Hope. He rode as far as The Gulch and hired a man to ride out to his ranch to bring him news. Then, restless and frustrated, he went looking for Scott again.

It was noon when he knocked a second time at Scott's cottage. Again no one answered him. He circled round to the rear of the house and tried the back door. What possessed him, he didn't know, but after a minute, he drove his fist through the thin wood panel. He reached inside and turned the key. He walked through a spotlessly neat kitchen into the living room. He lingered a minute, looking at a colored advertising brochure on the table. It was the circular of a shipyard in Maine. It offered to build a steam yacht for you, for a quarter of a million dollars. Or you could have a smaller job for the paltry price of fifty thousand.

As his forehead puckered thoughtfully a step sounded in the kitchen. Doug whirled and looked into a double-barrelled shotgun in the arms of a gaunt woman. "So you cowmen are burglars too," the woman said.

"I seen you break in here, Mister. From my house, next door."

Doug didn't move. He could have drawn and fired, he guessed if she'd been a ruffian. He tried cajolery. "I ain't burglin', ma'am. I'm jest waitin' to talk to Scott. I got fifty dollars in my wallet. How about takin' it for the price of lettin' me stay here?"

But the woman shook her head. "Some of 'em might take it, Mister," she said. "Plenty of 'em maybe. That's what they're talkin' about, all up and down Main Street, this morning. They're goin' to elect John Scott president. And then he's going to dissolve the corporation. Divide everything up equal among us, and we're going to own our property and have money to spend. But I'm for none of it. You can't buy or bribe me with your filthy money. Supposin' you jest set down in that chair there."

Doug sat down. The woman took a chair across the room. "I don't believe in violence," she said. "None of us do that have faithfully listened to Caleb. But maybe I'd just as lief kill a cowman at that. Wouldn't be no more sin than killin' a skunk. You set there pert, Mister."

With his own useless gun still on his hip, Doug let himself relax in the chair. Minute by minute, an eternity began to lag past. He tried a dozen times to engage the woman in conversation. But she made it plain that she wasn't talking with any sinful cowman. The slow minutes became an hour. The hands on the expensive Dresden clock on the fireplace moved from one, to two, to three. It was three-thirty when someone pounded up onto the front porch and knocked.

THE WOMAN got up and edged to the door, keeping her shotgun trained Doug. A man in overalls asked for Scott, and then blurted out. "The men are askin' for him. They want him quick! Caleb rode in ten minutes ago. And now there's a deputy from White River here, who says Caleb shot and killed Jake Shump through the window of his cell!"

The man slammed the door and darted back to the street. Doug's captor stood there a second in a sort of daze. "Caleb," she murmured. "He says Caleb shot and killed—"

Doug sprang, as the woman's attention momentarily faltered. He reached her in a bound before she could swing her unwieldy weapon. He wrested the shotgun from her, and faced her sternly.

"Now ma'am, you're comin' with me, while I finish searchin'." He prodded her ahead of him as they explored the single floor. In a bedroom closet Doug found a silver-backed comb with the initials J. W. The cowboy's glance shot to the closet ceiling. Just beyond his reach was a trap door!

Doug's voice trembled. "Get me a chair, ma'am."

In the same second, Doug heard the front door open. He couldn't stop the woman. She uttered a cry, "Mr. Scott? In here! Quick! Help!" She turned and whirled into the hall, and as Doug charged after her, she got herself in the line of fire between himself and John Scott. Scott caught her and, using her as a shield, fired. The white-hot impact of a bullet caught Doug in the shoulder and slammed him against the wall.

He fired back as Scott sprang from behind the woman, but in his haste and wounded shock, he missed. Scott dropped on him with both knees and they rolled over, grappling for his gun. Then the woman smashed a vase in Doug's face, blinding him. The fingers of one of Scott's hands dug into his windpipe, and Scott hit him over the head with his pistol butt.

Breathing heavily, John Scott rose from beside the prostrate cowboy. He listened while the woman explained. "Burglarin', he was! He picked up something from the floor in there. A silver comb, it looked like, and put it in his pocket. Shall I fetch the doctor?"

John Scott pulled himself slowly together. "You needn't bother, Mrs. Hefflinger. I'll load him in my rig in a moment and take him down town. And in the meantime, thanks. Thanks very much."

The treasurer of the Utopia Society

watched his next door neighbor go down the hall. He heard the back door close. He hadn't anything to fear from her, poor, simple soul. The grim mouth twisted wryly. Poor, simple souls, all of them. These past few days, he had managed to make all of them dance like puppets on a string.

IMMENSELY satisfied with himself, Scott knelt beside the cowboy. With a silk handkerchief from his pocket he bound Ballard's hands behind him, and with a rope from the kitchen and another handkerchief he tied up his feet, and gagged his mouth. Then he got a ladder and carried the cowboy up through the trap door into the dark, unfinished attic. He dumped his burden like a sack of beans, walked a few steps farther and knelt beside the girl.

"I'm ready to make you a proposition, Miss Wharton," he said. "You hear me?"

Jody didn't answer him, and he didn't loosen the gag in her mouth to allow her to.

He said, "I haven't much time. My followers are waiting for me. I ought to be up the street, now, making a speech. . . . But I'm going to offer you one more chance. You can buy Ballard's life if you care to. I want to marry you, Miss Wharton. You've probably guessed a great deal of this, but I'll explain in detail. Your uncle found gold on his ranch, Jody. He took the news to Caleb Miller. And I happened to come into the hall at Caleb's castle that night, as the two men were arguing. I heard Ned Wharton finally promise Caleb Miller to keep his discovery a secret."

Scott's lips quirked. "That was why Caleb was so furious at you last night. He didn't want you or anyone else discovering the gold out there. He quite sincerely believes that sudden wealth would corrupt and ruin his colony. But he didn't murder your uncle. And he scarcely would have murdered you."

The man paused. "You know, I guess, who did murder your uncle. Lefty did, at my command. You see how shrewdly I've managed it, Jody? First I made a deal with Jake Shump. Promised him a great deal of money if he would hurrah the town and burn the jail. That was to stir up Caleb's followers. I knew that Caleb would forbid his followers to fight back. I knew that they would want to fight back. And that they would follow any new leader, who offered to command them."

Jody could heard the satisfaction in his voice. "But you see how shrewdly I played even that. *I* didn't offer to be their leader. I encouraged them to choose Caleb's son. Then I forced the boy to lead the Avenging Angels, and arranged with Lefty and with Shump to have him led into a trap and murdered. Shump was to have killed him. Lefty actually did, the way it worked out, but it doesn't matter. The boy is dead, Lefty is dead, and so is Shump. And only you and I know the part that I played, Jody. And when you're my wife, you can't testify against me. . . ."

For a long moment, Scott was silent. "You have to be my wife, Jody, for the perfect fulfillment of the rest of my plan. Once I take over the Utopia Society, I plan to yield—reluctantly—to the pressure of those men who want to put an end to our cooperative plan. I expect to give each man a deed to the property which he now holds. You'll receive, you see, a deed to your uncle's homestead. You see why I must marry you?"

Scott walked to the trap door, listened a moment, and then returned. "But let me warn you, too, Jody. I can play out the rest of this without you. Marrying you may be the simplest way to get your uncle's mine, but it isn't the only way. I could have the society's community property distributed among the individual members by a lottery. I could get your uncle's homestead, by manipulating the lottery! Think it over. When I return, with a license and a justice of the peace, you can marry me. Or you can be stubborn— I've committed three murders thus far. I shan't shrink, now, from committing two more."

JOHN SCOTT walked back to the trap door and descended the ladder. Fifteen minutes later, he walked through the crowd which was assembling on Main

Street in front of Utopia Hall. Complete satisfaction filled him as he heard the crowd break into cheers. No one could ever say that he had deliberately sought the leadership of Caleb Miller's colony. But he had contrived it so that when James Miller was erased from the picture, everyone would turn naturally to John Scott!

He marched on into the hall. He mounted the rostrum, and in his grave, sober way, he talked to the assembled multitude for half an hour. . . .

Many problems face us," he said, "but perhaps the most pressing and the most immediate is—how shall we treat Caleb Miller? Shall we protect him? Refuse to let the cowmen arrest him for the murder of Jake Shump?

"We face a terrifying possibility, my brethern. Did Caleb murder Shump, as an outraged father? Or is the picture far more ugly? Did Caleb, perhaps, connive with Shump to have James Miller treacherously murdered, so that Caleb could continue to rule over you like a tyrant? Caleb refused to yield to your demands that he step aside. Drunk with power, he slew his son! And then murdered Shump, to keep Shump from talking!"

From all over the hall, there came a lusty roar of approval. "Sure," came the cry. "Let's lynch him!"

John Scott held up his hand in horror. "Not lynch him. But let's let the Sheriff from White River come in here and take him. There's a fairer day dawning just round the corner," Scott pleaded. "Let's keep our hands clean!"

ALL THAT night since John Scott had overpowered her in the buggy, Jody Wharton had struggled at intervals against her bonds. With Doug Ballard lying wounded beside her, she fought the more furiously. Scott had tied her well. There was very little play in the ropes.

Hours passed, it seemed. Doug, at her side, had stirred and was struggling, too. He couldn't speak to her through the gag in his mouth. But she felt his presence and it filled her with courage. She watched him wriggle, slow inch by inch, to the trap door. He had enough free play in his fingers, to open it. He disappeared over its sill, and there was an instant thud below, as his trussed body fell like a sack of meal through the opening. Then silence—had he knocked himself out?

Doug Ballard lay there for a long moment on the closet floor, nauseated by pain which he had set to throbbing again in his wounded shoulder. By sheer will-power, he forced his body to move. Inch by inch, he got across the bedroom floor, through the hall and into the kitchen. He dragged himself into a chair beside the stove. He got his bound wrists onto the hot stove top.

The silk handkerchief which bound his wrists charred a little. He burst his bonds at last.

Outside on the street, he heard the pound of hoofbeats as of a mob. But he didn't go outside. With his pocket knife, he cut the bonds on his ankles. He found a carbine in a kitchen closet. Then he returned to the attic and knelt by Jody.

Down in the Gulch, a strange thing was happening. A Millerite sodbuster walked into the Railroad Bar and invited a group of cowhands to come up to New Hope and help arrest Caleb Miller. About the time that Doug was roasting his wrists on the stove-lid, a group of his neighbors were surrounding Caleb Miller's castle in New Hope.

Caleb said to a tiny group of his followers who had assembled to protect him, "Put away your guns. I'm going out to them."

"And surrender?"

"Vengeance is the Lord's," said Caleb. "If it be the Lord's wish that I die for my mistakes, then let me die. . . ." A beatific expression overspread the old patriarch's face. "Maybe, even with the best intentions in the world, I *have* been a tyrant. Maybe I hadn't the right to persuade Ned Wharton to keep secret his discovery of gold on his ranch."

"Gold?" asked someone.

"I thought it was Satan's gold," said Caleb Miller. Strong and straight, he walked

out of his house. Meekly, he surrendered to the posse.

IN THE MUSTY attic, Doug Ballard took just a second to hold Jody tight his arms. For a fleeting instant, he kissed her. Then the two of them left the attic. A man's footsteps were already pounding on the porch steps, as they came out of the bedroom into the hall.

Doug took a quick backward step and put the carbine into Jody's hands. "If you have to shoot your way out here," he told her, "shoot!"

"And you?"

He could have got the drop on Scott, taken him at gun-point, or shot it out with him if Scott had made a pass for his own gun. But a deeper urge rose in Doug Ballard. He had been interrupted, once, on the station platform before he could battle it out. He had fought Scott more recently under the cruel handicap of the neighbor's presence. Now his left arm dangled useless from the shoulder, his blistered wrists ached. But something ached in his heart, too, the overpowering desire to master Scott with his own bare hands!

He waited, just inside the bedroom door. He let Scott pass him. Then flinging out his one good arm, he leaped upon his adversary from the flank. He bore Scott over in a mad rush. He crashed with him to the floor, dropped with his knees into the man's ribs.

With a roar of pain, Scott twisted sideways. Doug felt a fist explode in his face. He crashed his own good fist to the side of Scott's jaw. Scott, with the advantage of one hand over Doug, reached inside his coat, for the gun in his shoulder holster. Doug flung himself sprawling on top of his enemy, and seized the gun wrist. Scott shot his knees upward into Doug's stomach, but the cowpuncher clung to Scott's wrist.

The renegade Millerite rolled over on his side. Doug jerked on his wrist, and Scott's own momentum broke it. Scott uttered a cry like a bleating sheep, and the strength and the fight ebbed out of him. Doug leaned forward, picked up the gun and got to his own shaky feet.

And Scott's voice suddenly came to him in a whine. "Listen to me! Don't let them lynch me. I'll confess— Reach in my pocket. There's a white horse-hair wig in there that I wore when I killed Shump. That's why the sheriff thought Caleb killed him. Maybe, if you tell the mob before they lynch Caleb, they'll grant me mercy."

Doug made the violent effort to pull himself together. The flesh wound in his shoulder had commenced to bleed again. He felt very sick and very faint, but he summoned the energy to reach into Scott's pocket. He waited while Jody bound his prisoner's wrists. Then he prodded Scott at gun-point, out of the house and up the street. . . .

DOUG forced his prisoner into the center of the court of Millerite. He let Jody do the talking and lifted his own voice only to say, "Let's not try Scott tonight. Let's wait, till the county summons a grand jury composed of Millerites, cattlemen and everybody. And let's follow the session by a barbecue. Now that we've got rid of men like Shump and Scott, maybe we can all sit down together and get acquainted. What was it you said once, Jody? If all of us tried honestly to understand each other, we could have peace in this world we live in?"

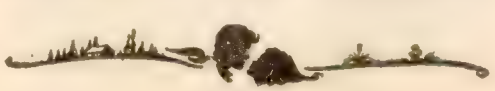
He walked over and shook Caleb Miller's hand.

He came back to Jody's side in time to hear a Millerite ask her, "But this gold that your uncle found—whose will it be?"

Jody answered without hesitation, "It will belong to Caleb's colony, naturally. Though nobody knows yet what they'll do with it—whether they'll divide it, or keep it in the treasury."

"And you ain't jealous, ma'am?" the Millerite inquired.

Doug watched her shake her head. Her soft brown eyes in the same moment met his eyes. She came toward him and stood close to him. "I've found the riches," she said softly, "that I came out here to find."



The Last Deal

By Bill Severn

COULD Russ Saunders subdue his gambling blood, when a sucker's ante was the girl that both of them loved?

IT WAS mighty amusing, the way the women around Lobeyville started discovering aches in their teeth after Russ Saunders set up his dentist office over the barber shop. Most of the tooth pulling in that part of the short grass country had been done with a string on a doorknob, and anybody who wanted store choppers or a mouthful of gold caps waited for some traveling jawsmith to wander through.

But now, there was most always some sweet young thing sitting in his office chair and being very brave while Russ told her, "This won't hurt much, ma'am." And the way they begged for attention, it must have been true that his work was practically painless. Some folks said a lot of the molars Russ fixed had roots that went all the way to a girl's heart.

He sure enough was handsome, tall and red-haired and as hard-looking as a top hand from one of the valley ranches. Tie that to a grin and a Texas drawl and toss in the fact that none of the girls could get him to take her seriously, and you've got a pretty good idea why Russ didn't have to put an ad in the *Weekly Banner* to get patients.

The men came to him too. Some were just plain curious to know him and find out

what their women folks were talking about. But they learned Russ was right good at yanking an owlhoot ivory or rounding up a stray ache. Most of the men got to like him for the way he went about his own business. If he had a personal reason for leaving the girls alone, that was plenty all right with them.

Russ had a good thing of it in Lobeyville and he knew it. A lot better than being one jump ahead of some sheriff who thought his card playing was too lucky to be honest. He hadn't touched a deck of cards or put silver on the draw of a wild deuce since he had come to Lobeyville. But Russ wasn't happy.

The girl in the chair now was a blonde pretty enough to have stepped from the picture on a calendar. Russ had his back to her, and he stared out his office window at the main street, which wasn't pretty at all.

His eyes pulled to the sign over the false-fronted saddlery: HARLEY MALCOLM, PROP. And Russ felt temptation itch his fingers. He stiffened his shoulders and turned from the window, as the blonde sighed for attention.

Russ took the paregoric-soaked cotton from her tooth. "Stopped hurting now?"

"Oh, yes." Her lashes fluttered. "You're wonderful, the way you know just what to do."

He grinned a bit. There was a time he would have accepted the invitation that look offered. "I reckon it won't trouble you again."

"Shouldn't I come back to have you look at it?"

"No need to." Russ heard the outer door open as he answered. He tried to see who was in his waiting room, but the screen was in the way.

The girl didn't get up. Her pout deepened. "It throbs on this side too." She touched her finger to her cheek. "Right here."

He lifted the probe from his table, bent close.

"Ouch!" She jumped, caught her arms around his shoulders. "That hurt." But the throaty way she whispered it sounded as though she would be willing to forgive him.

"Just go home and rest awhile." Gently, but quite firmly, Russ removed her arms. "It's what we call a sympathy ache, ma'am. Take it easy and it'll go away."

Her face burned. "Aren't you—human?" She whirled around, slammed the door behind her as she strode out.

RUSS grinned again and went to the front room. His grin tightened when he saw who was there. Looking at Martha Dobie, he felt very human.

"Hello, Russ." Martha nodded toward the slammed door, and her smile teased him in a way that crinkled a reflection of laughter around her eyes. "The lady seemed angry."

"Can't please 'em all." His smile didn't quite match Martha's.

"I chipped a tooth." She showed him and then backed a step and laughed. "Don't look at me like that. I won't try to kiss you."

"A man has to be careful."

Still laughing, she made a face at him. "Harley gave me a necklace, and I tried to pull the clasp with my teeth." Martha went in and sat in the chair. "I guess I should know better."

"Yes," Russ said, "you should." He took a small mirror from the cabinet. "How is Harley? Haven't seen him lately. He hasn't been in the Elite for lunch."

"He's been going to the Palace."

Russ held up the mirror, waited for her to open her mouth. "Why the Palace?"

"Cards. They play at lunch time now too." Martha sighed. "I'm worried, Russ. I don't mind Harley's having fun with the other men. But he's been losing too much money. He—he's even taken out a mortgage on the store."

"I heard about that." He shook his head, and his hand was unsteady as he twisted the mirror. "Should be saving his money for a house. Now that you're getting married soon, I mean."

"Harley tries. It isn't his fault. Gambling is like—like a fever with him."

"It's a fever a man can cure, if he has reason enough."

"You don't know how it is."

"Maybe not. But I do know if I had a

girl like you in love with me, I'd want to be the kind of man she could be proud of."

"You're sweet, Russ." Martha smiled. "That's a very pretty compliment. I'm sure the girl you marry will be proud of you."

He twisted the mirror harder and heard a snap. The thin metal rod was broken in two. Knowing what would be in his eyes, Russ couldn't look at Martha. He kept his back to her and made out he was searching for something on the table.

"I've often wondered about you," she said. "Was there a girl, Russ?"

His laugh was dry. "Plenty of 'em."

"Not from what I've heard." She laughed with him. "They practically throw themselves into your arms, and you don't pay any attention."

"Shouldn't believe everything you hear." Russ faced her, his smile under control. See, he could look right at her now and not reveal a thing. He could— Russ moved forward. He lifted Martha from the chair. He held her and kissed her.

She didn't turn away immediately. It was a full second before she stepped back. "Russ!"

His arms dropped.

Her eyes were shocked, telling him he should know she was a lady, she was Harley Malcolm's fiancée, not some girl to be grabbed at. Martha turned without a word and went to the door.

"I'm sorry."

She put her hand on the knob. Hesitantly, she took it away again. "I suppose that was partly my fault for teasing you, but I hardly expected you to behave like that." She looked right at him. "I'm sorry this happened, too, Russ." Straightening her shoulders she opened the door.

Russ took a step after her. He stopped. Slowly he crossed to the window, watching her as she came out of the building. She went to the other side of the street and climbed the two wooden steps from the plank walk at Harley's store.

HIS EYES flicked up to the sign above. That tingling at his fingertips was as sharp as though he held a pack of cards in his hand ready to be dealt.

Russ reached for the water bottle on his table and filled a glass. His throat was dry with the tense nervousness he had always felt before a game. He was sorely tempted. It would be easy for a man who knew cards to take everything Harley had. Everything, including Martha.

It made Russ want to laugh. Because if ever there was a gambling fool, it was Harley. And fate was coming up with a joker in the final deal for Russ. Harley was at the felt covered table in the back room of the Palace Bar every night. It would be so easy to take him.

Martha would never associate with a gambler. She had been brought up as a lady, and a gambler was someone from the wrong side of the street. But a respectable businessman with a weakness for cards was different. Harley might bet his hat or his shirt, his store or all his money, but it wasn't the same. Not like a common gambler . . . . Not like that day in the Santa Fe hotel.

Russ had discovered how lucky he was at cards during his student days at dental school. He had stuck around for his diploma, but the pasteboards seemed an easier way to live than setting up in business as an ivory carpenter. The big money went as fast as it came to him, but Russ drifted from one game to another, pretty much satisfied with himself until that day in Santa Fe.

He had been in the hotel dining room, having the best meal the house could offer, kidding the waitress and thinking about the game set for that night, when Martha came in. He didn't know her name then and he hadn't found out until later that she was visiting an aunt and uncle. But Russ did know right away that Martha was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. And something more than beauty. Something missing from the kind of life he had drifted into.

She was small enough to tuck into the pocket of his plaid vest. Her eyes were a darker brown than any eyes had a right to be. Her mouth was a warm flame against the white of her teeth. The proud way she held her head, her whole manner, was a challenge.

He sat and stared and forgot the food on the table. He studied the way her hair was

pinned back, traced each curl separately across the pink shell of the ear turned in his direction, followed the curve of her shoulders, the lift of her breathing. He imagined he could hear the intimate whispering of her green taffeta gown as she leaned forward. And he wanted to take out his heart and put it before her and tell her, "I've been saving this for you an awful long time."

But Martha didn't see him. Or if she did, she gave no indication she knew he was there. When she spilled the glass of water and pushed back her chair with a startled little cry of dismay, it seemed to Russ that Lady Luck was tipping her hand to him once again. He went over quickly, picked up the glass and offered his handkerchief for her to wipe her gown.

And whether he smiled or gawked plain silly, standing there close to her, he didn't know. But he did know that the blood was all in his head, pounding at his temples, and not only because he had bent down like that.

"Thank you." Her smile was a benediction.

"I'll get the waiter, ma'am."

"Oh, no. Really, it's quite all right."

It was then that Russ saw the man's hand on her arm. Odd, he hadn't noticed there was someone with her at the table. Russ hadn't seen anyone but her. Martha's companion was elderly, grey-haired, dignified. Perhaps her father or her uncle.

The look in the man's eyes stopped Russ from speaking. It was a warning, as though Russ had overstepped some invisible barrier. "We don't need your assistance, young man."

NOT THE words, but the way they were said, made Russ turn away. He nodded stiffly and tried to grin. The look cut that, too. As he returned to his table, he saw Martha frown after him momentarily, puzzled by her uncle's abrupt manner.

Seating himself again, Russ heard the explanation she was given. It was said in a tone he was meant to hear. "The man's a gambler. A cheap swindler. His kind should be run out of town."

When Martha passed his table, leaving the dining room, her head was turned and her nose was tilted up as though she smelled something bad. Russ half expected her to sweep aside her skirt, as if the hem of it had touched dirt.

His face went hot. He told himself to forget it. Little Miss Too-Good, who did she think she was? He laughed and teased the waitress and talked her into meeting him when he was through work. Plenty of other girls. Other towns, too. Him, a swindler? Why, ask anybody—he played a strictly honest game. As honest as the rest of them, anyhow.

But it gnawed at him. Russ was conscious of other glances as he went down the street, eyes that purposely didn't see him, heads turned the other way. Not all of them. Most folks didn't care. If he wanted to be a gambler, that was his business.

Well, it was. And a good business, too. Russ won that night and the next.

But there wasn't the same kick in winning or in spending. And even the husky laughter that went with soft arms and too-willing kisses left him feeling cheated and wanting something more.

It took time to know—time and learning to doubt himself before he was ready to believe he had stacked his own deck the wrong way.

Then, there was finding Martha, learning where she lived when she wasn't visiting in Santa Fe. Equipment to buy and an office to rent in Lobeyville. Meeting her and becoming her friend, a professional man accepted by the community. Hoping Martha wouldn't remember glancing a second or two at a gambler who had happened to be in a dining room in Santa Fe.

Martha didn't remember. To her, the momentary incident of a spilled glass of water hadn't been important enought to give a second thought. Besides, all her thoughts were for Harley. Russ found out about Harley after he had met Martha again.

So many times, he had stood here at the window like this, watching the wind swing that faded sign: HARLEY MALCOLM,

PROP. So many times, Russ had turned his back.

But his mouth was warm with Martha's kiss. She had been in his arms.

Martha would have been furious if a gambler had so much as tried to take her hand. But she could tell the dentist who was her friend, "I suppose that was partly my fault . . . ." without anger or disdain.

There would be ironic satisfaction in dealing cards to Harley. That taunting sign would come down for good. Harley would be broken, unable to offer marriage. Their engagement would be smashed by Harley's weakness. And Russ would be free to tell Martha he loved her.

Russ rubbed his fingers against his shirt. He looked down at his hands. The dentist would take the bride the gambler couldn't have. But the gambler would have to win her.

HARLEY seemed glad to see Russ at the Palace Bar that night, but the other men in the game didn't look too happy. Harley had been a good thing for them. "Been thinking for some time I'd drop in and take a friendly hand," Russ explained. "Got room for me?"

"Always room for new money," Harley said.

Russ laughed. "I don't aim to lose as much as you do, Harley."

The rest of them joined in the laughter and after the first few hands, their smiles showed they were thinking Russ was as much a sucker as Harley. The table was out for the dumb money. And the careless way Russ played, even Harley won.

The night cost Russ three hundred dollars. Harley, for the first time in weeks, was ahead. He bought Russ a drink, slapped him on the back. "Count you in again tomorrow night?"

"Well, I reckon I would like a chance to win back what I dropped." Russ looked at the table to keep from laughing right out.

He went down as heavily the next night. Harley didn't want to stop the game. "It's late," Russ told him, "but if you want a few more hands, I'll stay." He shuffled the cards. "Want to put a limit on it?"

"Never have." Harley's eyes narrowed greedily. "If you can't match the bets, drop out, Russ. But you'll never break even that way."

Russ shuffled again. His fingers touched lightly along the edge of the deck. He dealt in the same slow manner. "How many?"

In an hour, Harley was out of cash. Russ offered to stake him. Harley's face was as simple to read as a deck of marked cards. Russ had never run into anything this easy on the road.

It was dawn when the game ended. Harley's hand shook so he could hardly add up what he owed. He dropped the pencil. "We'll cut the cards." His voice rasped. "My store against what you won. High man."

Russ shook his head and shoved back his chair. "I won't do that. Think of Martha. How can you get married if you lose everything—what will she say?" He got up. "I'm sorry it went this far, Harley. You had a chance to get out when we were even."

"Cut the cards!"

"You want it that way?"

"I said, cut them!"

Russ rubbed his fingers on his shirt. He took a deep breath. The game had been his knowledge against Harley's, but this would be pure luck. There were ways to cheat, of course—Russ knew how to hold a pack so it would break right. But he didn't do it like that. This had to be honest. He lifted the cards. King of hearts. He grinned.

The four of clubs fell from Harley's fingers to the table. "I'm through. Everything I've got." He sat limply in the chair.

Russ gathered the slips of paper. He handed Harley the pencil so he could sign over the store. Russ took the paper and looked at the shaky signature Harley had scrawled.

The other men drifted out. They were grim, hard-faced, with nothing to say. The room was quiet.

"I've played you square, Harley," Russ said. "I want to keep this square too. You lost more than money and your store."

Harley looked up blankly. "What more could I lose?"

"Martha."

"You want Martha?" He sat straight. "That's one thing you won't take. She loves me."

"How could she after tonight?"

Russ went out and up the street to his office. He sat there in the half-darkness of grey dawn. He didn't feel right inside. He was burned out, empty. It didn't make sense to feel like this. He wanted Martha. He had won her.

He stood and crossed to the window. Dim red sun edged the hills beyond Lobeyville, deepening the shadows that scurried from it. Somehow, the hills made Russ feel small, part of the shadows, wanting to hide from the sun.

HE HAD no reason to hide. The game had been honest. If Harley was weak, that wasn't Russ' fault. Could he help it if Harley cared more about gambling than he did about Martha? Russ took the water glass from the table and filled it. He lifted it to his mouth. He put the glass down and stared at it. And he remembered when he had felt like this before and why. He remembered the way a girl in green taffeta had looked at a gambler. The grin that pulled his mouth hurt.

He hadn't won. This way, he couldn't win. Martha would marry the man she loved. He had taken everything Harley had, but not Martha. She wasn't Harley's to lose or his to win with a cut of the cards.

Russ shaved and had breakfast at the Elite. When the sun was full, he crossed the street to Harley's store. Fingering the slips of paper in his pocket, he opened the door.

And then he stopped and stood there and all the words he had been about to say went out of him.

Martha was there, too. Her eyes were red from crying, and Russ knew she had been arguing with Harley. She had heard about last night.

"Come to collect, have you?" Harley asked. "You didn't lose any time."

Russ shook his head. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the papers. He dropped them to the counter. "These are yours, Harley."

Harley stared at them. "What do you mean? You won."

"No." Russ shook his head stiffly and tried to grin. "I tricked you. I've played cards before." He looked at Martha a second. "Harley hasn't lost anything. He can still marry you."

Russ walked from the store. He went to his own office. Martha would stop crying now. She had Harley, and Harley had his store and everything was fine. Sure, just fine.

He sat in the big chair and studied the table and the cabinets and all the equipment. Anyhow, Martha had given him this. He had a good business.

Russ shut his eyes and shook his head. He heard the office door open. He didn't feel like working. He didn't care about toothaches. He ached too, but not in his teeth. He sighed and got up.

"Martha!"

SHE CAME all the way into the office. "Why?" she asked softly.

His eyes lifted away. He had to play this game through. If ever he needed a poker face, it was now. "You mean last night?" Russ fixed his eyes on the window. "I had a crazy idea maybe I could teach Harley a lesson." He swallowed. "Reckon I have, too. He won't gamble again for awhile."

"Harley told me what you said—about me."

"Oh, that." Russ shrugged. "Figured it wouldn't do any harm to scare him good."

"Did you?" She moved closer.

"Crazy idea. Thought maybe I could help."

"I think you have," Martha said. "You've taught me a lesson, Russ."

He swung around. She was smiling. Martha's eyes seemed to be looking right through him, the way they had that day in Santa Fe. But the expression was different now, as though she saw something else. She lowered her eyes an instant.

Deliberately, Martha leaned over and poured a glass of water from the bottle. She lifted the glass and her fingers tipped. A splash of water fell on her gown. "Now that was clumsy of me, wasn't it?"

Russ reached for his handkerchief automatically, but his hand stayed in his pocket. "You remember?"

"I recognized you in Harley's store. The gambler, the swindler who should have been run out of Santa Fe." She smiled again. "What happened to that gambler?"

"I—figured it was time to settle down and go respectable. I'd studied to be a dentist, and that was what I should have been doing. This looked like a good little town."

"You're lying." Martha put her hand on his arm gently, so he barely felt the touch of her fingers. "I knew you were in love with me. The way you spoke, everything about you. But I didn't know the rest until now, Russ—" She laughed softly. "Don't look at me like that. I won't try to kiss you —unless you want me to."

Martha's whisper was warm against his mouth. Russ held her close and he kissed her and he didn't try to talk. There was too much to tell her any way but this.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Some breeders of registered, purebred cattle do not brand them on the body. How do they mark them?

2. The young of what large wild animal of Western mountain regions weighs only 10 to 20 ounces at birth?

3. Modern shearing machines clip much faster, but in the old days, about how many sheep could a good shearer clip in one day: 10 to 20, 30 to 40, 50 to 70, 80 to 100, 120 to 140?

4. Name at least three Western towns or cities named for saints.

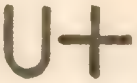
5. The sunflower is the state flower of what Western state?

6. Give at least two cowboy nicknames for a boy or youngster.

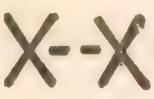
7. About how tall is an average, full-grown bull buffalo (bison) measured at the shoulders?

8. What did the old-time cowboy refer to by such slang terms as mule-ears, California moccasins, peewees, custom-mades, stogies, horseback slippers, corn squeezers?

9. Which kind of bread was the old-time cowboy likely to call gun-waddin': biscuits, corn bread, pancakes, or yeast-raised lightbread?

10. How would you read these old Wyoming brands: 

(1)

(2)  **(3)**

——Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 104. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Impulsive Hombre

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

GIL WAS A GUY who made up his mind on the spur of the moment. Quick as a kiss he knew he loved that girl who ferried outlaws

GIL PAYSON, having cat-footed into the kitchen, dropped his armful of wood with a good deal more noise than was necessary. His partner jumped back from the table and made a hurried try at hiding the can of dry mustard.

"Figured you was up to somethin', Shorty," Gil said. "The way you been edgin' around, tryin' to sneak in here, was the give-away. Now what's the large idea of stirrin' mustard into my biscuit dough?"

Shorty Latham's rough-cut features showed guilt, apology, and rising alarm. "Now Gil, don't you get any impulsive idees!" he pleaded, backing prudently into a corner. It ain't goin' to hurt a thing if that little ferry-wranglin' blonde concludes that bachelor cookin' is like to poison us. Maybe she'll come up here regular an' fix us chow with that feminine touch!"

In spite of Gil's effort to maintain a stern front, one of those baffling impulses of his put a grin on his lean face. "Shorty, you're a lop-eared galoot that's got a lot yet to learn about women."

"Huh! Just because you taken a dislike to the gal— Oh-oh, there she is now!"

The sound of a horse's hoofs and a gay call of greeting came to them from the yard. Shorty gave his shirt collar a couple of nervous tugs to straighten it, and stood on tiptoe to inspect his visage in the mirror. There wasn't a thing he could do about the face, except give a regretful sigh.

"I've taken a dislike to nobody," Gil said. "I hardly know the filly. But you been dazzled by a pretty face. What if she turns out to be the inquisitive type that wants to know how often you change your socks? Well, you gave her the invite, so get out there an' act as reception committee while I start over on the biscuits."

Those biscuits were a source of some pride to Gil Payson. It wasn't that he liked the job of wrangling pots and pans over a hot stove. It was a chore that had to be done—and Shorty sure wasn't cut out for it. So Gil had arched his neck and tackled the job, and made out pretty well. Particularly with the biscuits.

Now he aimed to show this blonde pilgrim that he-cooking could be as tasty as any. A matter of principle, that's what it was.

He didn't get far with it. He was just reaching for the baking powder when Nella Cline stuck her inquisitive nose into the kitchen. It was a nice nose, upturned at the end just enough to hint at a sassy disposition. It was followed up by a pretty, smiling face, a cascade of gold-colored hair, and a figure that gave class to the simple blouse-and-riding-britches outfit she wore.

"Hi, Tall-in-the-Kitchen," she said to Gil. "How are you? My gosh, did you throw all that flour around the place on purpose? Here, let me take over before you waste the rest of it!"

Gil didn't have any say in the matter, seemed like. Deftly she swiped the apron from around his middle. Then she put her hands firmly against his chest and shoved him out into the living room.

He sat down and glared at Shorty Latham. But Shorty seemed so filled up with dreamy happiness that he didn't notice.

With remarkable speed, the girl got the meal on the table, and they sat down to fragrant steaks, the apple pie Gil had baked, and the biscuits.

Those biscuits were fluffy and tender. Trying to be plumb impartial about judging whether they topped his own product, Gil ate six of them. Then he found the girl's

very blue eyes watching him with that amused, you-poor-dumb-he-critter expression.

"You seem to like them, Mr. Payson," she said.

"They're right good, ma'am," he informed her stiffly.

Shorty, whose wide mouth was pulled into a grin that threatened to displace his ears, washed down a big gulp with coffee and gurgled happily. "Miss Cline, this is

the best eatin' us pore lonesome bachelors ever tied into!"

She flushed prettily. "I'm glad you like it, boys. Because I—I had a motive in accepting your invitation. I want to talk to you. About your stock."

She seemed breathless, all of a sudden. And Gil, instantly on guard against feminine wiles, said, "What about our stock?"

"Every summer, you drive your herd up to that National Forest range you've got leased. But to get across the river you've got to go forty miles downstream to the ford. That's not good business. You sweat at least a hundred pounds off every steer. At today's beef prices you'd save by using my ferry."

Gil was somewhat surprised by this girl's display of cow-savvy. But he flashed Shorty a what-did-I-tell-you glance, and settled down to get stubborn. "That ferry ain't safe, Miss Cline. The cables are rusty, the float logs are rotten. I been wonderin' why you bought it an' started it up again. Only business it ever did was transportin' the owlhoot gents that hole up in the Sawtooths. Folks in Shiprock finally got hot under the collar about gettin' robbed an' havin' the wild bunch make an easy getaway across the river, an' they ran the old cuss that operated the ferry plumb out of the country. They figured he was in cahoots with Barlow's bunch."

GIL HAD made it pointed enough to bring blue sparks of anger to Nella Cline's eyes. "I'm not working for Barlow, if that's what you're getting at! I came to Shiprock looking for work. There wasn't any, but I had a little money that Dad left me when he died—he'd just sold our ranch when he took sick. John Hathaway, the timekeeper at the Crescent Mine, suggested I buy the ferry. Johnny's a good judge of values, and when I didn't have quite enough money to swing the deal, he loaned me the difference. And if those outlaws want to ride on the ferry, I—I'm not going to turn down their business. If the law lets them run around loose, why should I treat them different from anyone else? It . . . might be thrilling to meet some honest-to-gosh owlhooters!"

"Plumb thrillin'," Gil said. "Them hombres are too quick an' too tough for the law. Maybe you can tame 'em."

Shorty Latham was squirming, alarmed at the way things were going. "Gil," he protested, "do you have to go at this impulsive-like? Miss Nella's got a swell idee about ferryin' our cows—"

"No Circle GB critter," Gil interrupted, "is goin' to set foot on that rickety raft."

Shorty looked at Nella. ""That's the way the long-geared galoot is," he complained. "Jumps to some fool conclusion, mostly by impulse, then sticks to it no matter what."

The girl rose, rounded the table, and bent quickly to plant a light kiss upon Shorty's cheek. "That's all right, Shorty, *You're* sweet."

Shorty glowed. But a sharp knock on the door tightened the frown on Gil's face. He jumped to his feet, hand on gun-stock, and turned the knob.

John Hathaway's smoothly handsome features confronted him as the door opened. "Hello there, Payson," the Shiprock man said.

"You come up on a place uncommon quiet," Gil stated.

Hathaway, who spent his time in an office and couldn't be expected to know much about range etiquette, ignored that and pushed his well tailored frame past Gil. "There you are, Nella!" he exclaimed with a flashing smile. "Your Mex hired hand down at the ferry told me you'd come here. He said you had some idea of cluttering up our ferry with this two-bit outfit's herd, so I thought I'd better come right over."

"You needn't worry," Nella said. "It seems to be settled."

Right then, Gil Payson felt himself kicked in the pants by an impulse. He was certain that Hathaway had been listening at the door. He didn't like that, and he liked the sleek, flashy timekeeper even less.

So he said, "Sure, it's all settled. We're startin' our gather in the mornin'. In two-three days we'll have the herd bunched. Should keep that two-bit ferry busy a spell, takin' 'em across."

Nella's startled blue eyes swung to Gil's face. And John Hathaway's evident sur-

prise proved that he'd done some listening before he knocked.

"Now see here!" Hathaway snapped angrily. "You can't—"

"Johnny," Nella said, "I'm tired. Now that you're here, you can take me home. Will you catch my horse for me, Shorty?"

Shorty grabbed a lantern and followed Nella outside. But Hathaway held back. "Payson," he warned, "you keep your nose out of my business. I've got an interest in that ferry, and in the girl too, savvy?"

Gil grinned. "You been right helpful to her, helpin' her buy that ol' abandoned raft. Whatever the price was, it amounted to robbery. I always did wonder why a fancy gent like you put in his time at the job you got—an' now I'm gettin' a powerful notion to bash you one. Get out, before I damage your good looks."

Hathaway peered sharply at Gil's tanned features, then left.

WHEN SHORTY came back into the house and blew out the lantern he still was dreamy-eyed. "Man, she's pretty as all getout! An' that cookin' —Gil, you hurry up an' marry her, before that Hathaway skunk dabs his loop on her!"

"Marry her yourself! You was the one she kissed."

"Shucks, with my looks, that was like she'd patted a Roman-nosed cayuse an' cooed to him, because he was so ugly she figured he was what they call cute. You're the hombre that's got to uphold the honor of the Circle GB in this here race. She seemed right happy after you changed your mind about ferryin' the stock. Now maybe if we got you barbered an' slicked up some—"

"What was it I told you about pretty gals?" Gil inquired. "A man never can tell what they're up to. While you wrangle these dirty dishes, you do some thinkin' about that."

Gil did some thinking too. But it got him nowhere, because the image of a disturbingly lovely face kept floating into his mind, smiling and stampeding his reasoning processes.

Next day, he rode out with Shorty to begin the gather. Along about noon he got an impulse to head down to the ferry and see if the girl was getting ready to handle the stock. The old and busted-down decking of the raft would have to be fixed, and some new, stronger gangplanks would be needed.

Besides, he wanted to see if she really was as pretty as the image that still haunted his mind.

She was. She had a hammer in her hand and she was banging away at a big spike, hitting it maybe once in four-five tries. She tilted her head to throw her hair back from her face. "Hi!" she said, coming to her feet. "Getting ready for your herd, Mr. Payson!"

"Reckon it wouldn't cause any earthquake if you was to call me Gil. That is, if Johnny Hathaway don't object."

"What's Johnny got to do with that? His having an interest in the ferry doesn't make him my boss! We had a loud row, last night. I don't know why he's so set on turning down the business of ferrying your cattle. You haven't changed your mind about that again, have you?" She grinned.

Gil felt a buoyant glow. Putting Hathaway in his place, where Nella was concerned, suddenly seemed a plumb worthwhile enterprise. "Nope," he told her. "I may make up my mind kind of sudden-like, but once it's made up I—"

His weight, on the little ferry, had tilted it away from the shore on which it rested—and now the swift and sullen current of the river seized it and tilted it still farther. Nella gasped and seemed about to lose her balance.

The only way Gil could figure out to steady her was to put his arms around her. From there on, it didn't take much of a nudge from his unpredictable nature to make him kiss her. Her lips were soft and pliant, sweet as the first wild rose of spring. Her eyes closed, then they snapped wide open, lovely and blue and startled, and she stepped back and swung her hand smartly toward his cheek.

The hand stopped, though, an inch from his tanned hide. It quivered a moment, then lowered. "Well, Mr. Payson, I de-

clare! What kind of impulse made you do that?"

"Shucks, all of a sudden I realised you're so pretty an'—"

"There are lots of pretty girls. Do you kiss them all?"

"Well, whenever I get the chance." He had the bit in his teeth now, and he was feeling fine.

"But you never seemed to notice me in town! I never—"

Right then her wizened little old Mex helper, having rattled the windlass discreetly, spoke up. "*Señorita,* comes one hombre to other side of the river. I'm theenk he wan' to cross."

THE RIDER who waited, while the Mex worked the windlass and the big pulleys creaked along the guide-cable, was Ace Barlow. Gil watched with narrowed eyes as Barlow led his horse onto the ferry and gave Nella a knowing grin as he paid his fare.

Barlow was leader of the wild bunch that forted up in the Sawtooths. Stocky and swaggering, he had a scarred face and a way of sizing up Nella that made Gil clench his fists.

"Ain't you scared this daylight will hurt your eyes, Barlow?" Gil asked. "Night-ridin' feller like you might get blinded an' wander into Shiprock by mistake. Them town hombres might hang you, like they did that sidekick of yours they caught."

Barlow's face hardened. "Maybe I ain't goin' to Shiprock. Maybe you better stick to herdin' them beef critters of yours, cowpunch."

When the ferry reached shore Barlow mounted and rode north, taking the Shiprock trail. Gil thumbed back his hat and frowned.

"Nella, why'd you have to start up this ol' ferry, anyway? It's just a case of askin' for trouble. Them wild bunch hombres are mean, ornery, and nowise blind to a pretty face!"

Her eyes flashed. "Their money's as good as anybody's, Gil Payson! They may be thieves, but they don't steal kisses!"

"Maybe you think it would be plumb thrillin' if they did!"

Nella all but jumped up and down with anger.

"Get off this ferry, you big bossy galoot!" she ordered.

Gil stalked ashore and sent his horse at a gallop up the slopes of the Circle GB range. He was stomping mad—at himself.

He'd always figured that a man should put romantic notions aside until he got himself pretty well set, financially. And here he'd just been getting used to the idea that it would be mighty nice to dab his loop about Nella's slim shoulders, when he'd gone to work and tangled his twine for certain.

"One of these days," he promised himself, "I'm goin' to turn around right quick an' see which one of Satan's imps it is that shoves me into doin' such damn' fool things."

BY THE time he got to where Shorty was combing steers out of the brush, Gil had calmed down some. But his lean face was taut with determination.

Shorty peered at him anxiously. "I seen you ride down towards the ferry. What happened? Did you find out Hathaway's done slipped a ring on Nella's finger?"

"No! But he sure don't want our stock to cross on that ferry—so we're damn' well goin' to use it!"

With Gil setting the pace, they put in a hard day. At supper, Gil remained grimly silent.

"You keep on thinkin' that hard," Shorty warned, "an' you'll bust a cogwheel for sure. That gal must of put a hornet in your left shirt pocket!"

"She's sittin' on a keg of dynamite," Gil said. "An' lets on that she likes it! If that wild bunch uses her ferry an' pulls another raid on Shiprock town, there'll be all hell to pay. Shiprock'll fight. Maybe they'll catch up with Barlow's bunch at the ferry, an' that girl will find herself in the middle of a gun battle!"

"Say!" Shorty exclaimed in alarm, "she could be accused of operatin' the ferry for the outlaws, like was done before!"

Gil nodded. "That's what really bothers me. Maybe she is! She's up to somethin'—anybody would know there ain't enough

legitimate business to make that raft pay. An' she's got Diego Ramirez workin' for her."

"Noticed that, the time I was down there. But I figured the ol' cuss had sort of reformed. Gil, I don't see how any little gal that's so pretty an' appealin'-lookin' could be up to anything underhanded."

"I'm hopin' you're right," Gil said.

Shorty made a rough gather of the dishes and took them into the kitchen. But it wasn't more than a minute before his sudden yell brought Gil to his feet.

"Hey! Come out here, Gil, an' take a look at what's goin' on down at the ferry!"

With the Circle GB shack situated on a hill the way it was, the kitchen window commanded a distant view of the ferry crossing. Shorty and Gil could see the glow of a lantern that couldn't be anywhere but on the raft, since it crossed sedately to the opposite shore, then returned.

After that, a plume of dust lifted into the moonlight, pointing straight toward Shiprock.

"Half a dozen horses at least, kickin' up that dust," Shorty said. "Movin' along fast. Reckon it's Barlow's bunch?"

"Who else would ride like that, at night?"

"Then they're makin' a raid!" Shorty said in an awed voice. "Gil, that Nella gal's in cahoots with 'em. When they come back on the run, she'll take 'em across an' then stay there. When the Shiprock hombres hit the crossin' they'll be stumped. River's too fast an' ugly to swim, so Barlow'll have a forty-mile start for free!"

"Maybe she's in on it," Gil conceded, gripping Shorty's arm. "Maybe she ain't. We're saddlin' up, an' we'll ride down there an' see what Nella an' Diego are up to."

Shorty drew back. "Uh-uh! Me, I'm just a pore cowpunch that's had his brains addled by the sun. I'll take my chances, but not with that wild bunch. I ain't in their class nohow! I'll take my view from this window!"

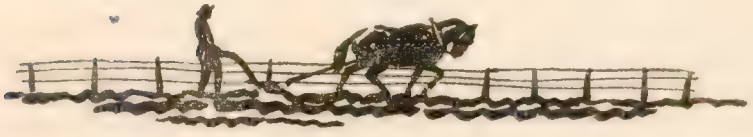
"Not afraid of a busted-down ol' Mex an' a pretty, appealin'-lookin' little gal, are you? Get down to that ferry an' see to it that she takes it over to the far bank pronto an' keeps it there. Me, I'll take the short-cut trail an' see if I can get to Shiprock ahead of those owlhoots, an' warn the town."

Cupid the Plowman

By S. OMAR BARKER

Bill never had done no plowin'—
A cowpoke all his life—
Till he took him a tardy notion
That he wanted to wed a wife.

'Twas Cupid that made him a plowman,
Which wasn't no three days' wonder,
For the gal he sparked was a widow
Who wanted her weeds plowed under!



GIL MADE his try, but he didn't reach Shiprock that night. He was riding through a tree-lined draw, riding faster than he should through the shadows maybe, when suddenly his horse veered. The pace was too fast for the bronc to stop in its tracks. And, too late, Gill saw the rope that stretched across the trail.

It caught him in the chest, knocked the wind from his lungs and yanked him from the saddle. The jolt of striking the ground dazed him for a moment.

When he snapped back to alertness he found that his hands were tied behind him. And his gun was missing from its holster.

Johnny Hathaway squatted calmly in the shadows nearby. "I was afraid you'd stick your nose into this, Payson. Won't do to have you bothering the boys while they help themselves to the mine payroll and settle their score with Shiprock. Did a good job of stopping you, didn't I?"

Gil felt just about as foolish as a man can. "Middlin' fair job," he admitted. "I reckon I savvy some things now. You took that timekeepin' job to find out where the Crescent Mine outfit kept its payroll money hid. An' Barlow, when he crossed on the ferry today, was headin' to meet you an' plan tonight's caper."

Hathaway's smile gleamed, and he gestured with the gun which he held in his hand. "It's a big mine—the payroll amounts to a respectable sum. My cut will finance a nice honeymoon down in Mexico."

"If it's Nella you're thinkin' of, you better think some more. She don't seem to like your style much."

"She'll change her mind. After she takes Barlow's bunch back across the river and I break the news about what they've done, he'll realize that the law would treat her as an accessory to the crime. She'll be glad to cross the Border with me." Hathaway prodded Gil with the gun. "Get up and on your nag. I want to be at that ferry when the boys get there. And I wouldn't think of leaving you here to get lonesome."

Gil's felings were pretty well mixed on the fast ride back. He was mighty glad about one thing—it seemed like Nella was not in cahoots with the wild bunch after all. But he realized that when Hathaway reached the river and saw the ferry lying at the far shore, sparks would fly.

Gil could see now why Hathaway had been so set against letting the Circle GB herd use the ferry. He'd been afraid that they'd have the ferry busy when he needed it. Hathaway was a shrewd hombre, all right, but in about a minute now he was going to be mighty riled.

They topped the last rise and began a slanting run down to the landing. Gil stiffened. The ferry wasn't at the far bank of the river. It was right where Hathaway wanted it, on this side, waiting for him! The Mexican was lounging against the windlass, and at the gangplank Nella lifted her white face toward Gil.

SHORTY LATHAM was nowhere in sight.

By the time Gil rode onto the ferry and balanced himself carefully on a stirrup to dismount, he was blazing mad. He gave Nella a look that was intended to sizzle with wrath, but somehow the wide-eyed, mute appeal of her face softened it.

And before he could open his mouth to say his say, a strung-out bunch of riders appeared on the trail from Shiprock. Ace Barlow was in the lead, with his right arm dangling and a dark stain spreading along his shirt sleeve.

"Get goin'!" Barlow yelled, spurring his mount onto the ferry. "Get this raft movin', Diego! Hathaway, you was damn little help!"

"I kept this gangling cowboy from spoiling things," Hathaway said. "He was trying to get to town ahead of you and raise a howl—now you boys can handle him. What happened? Did you get the money?"

"Yeah," Barlow snapped, dismounting along with the others. The pulleys were creaking, and the ferry was moving slowly away from the shore. "We got it, all right—but by the time we busted into that storehouse where it was hid, the town riled up like a nest of hornets. We lost two men an' had to make a run for it. We ain't got much of a lead, either. . . . Greaser, damn you, crank that win'lass faster!"

Glancing around helplessly, Gil caught the subdued glint of moonlight upon metal at the end of the ferry farthest from shore.

A gun lay in a notch in one of the logs, just above the water.

Shorty Latham's gun! Shorty must have been pitched into the river, and by some miracle his gun had landed there. Gil pulled a rein on his nerve, and edged over.

Nobody seemed to notice. Hathaway and Barlow were talking, and the others were looking toward Shiprock for signs of the fighting townsmen. Nella Cline, though, was aware of Gil's move. She stood with her back against the rail, and she looked straight at him and shook her head, her lips forming the word, "Don't!"

One of the big pulleys that rode the guide cable seemed stuck. "Hey, what's wrong?" Barlow yelled as the ferry stopped.

Diego gave the windless a couple extra tugs, then spread his trembling hands. "*Señor*, the pulley she 'ave jomp the cable."

"Well, get out there an' fix it!"

Diego started protesting that he was an old man and much afraid of the water. But a wild yell from one of the outlaws interrupted that.

"Here they come, boys!"

The irate townsmen of Shiprock formed a close-packed, purposeful group that swept rapidly toward the landing.

Gil had never felt so glad about anything in his life. With the ferry stalled a hundred feet from shore, Barlow's bunch would make excellent targets for the townsmen. The outlaws didn't need to be told about that. Now if Gil could get hold of Shorty's gun and get the drop on them from behind while they all faced the shore, they'd have no chance.

But when he looked toward the notched log he saw a wet, stubby arm reach out of the water and lift the weapon.

SHORTY LATHAM'S homely head bobbed into view.

"Stand hitched, you night-ridin' galoots!" Shorty yelled. "This here gun is dry, even if I ain't!"

Barlow looked around, then peered again at the men on the shore. "Lift 'em, boys," he ordered. "I know when I'm licked."

Only John Hathaway failed to lift his hands. He whirled upon Nella, his face twisted by rage. "You scheming little wildcat!" he blazed, striking savagely at her face with the edge of his hand.

The blow didn't land, because right then a powerful impulse sent Gil Payson lunging forward. Unable to use his hands, he tucked his head down between his shoulders and rammed Hathaway in the chest.

Hathaway was flung back. He toppled over the rail and landed in the water with a splash, but his floundering arms found one of the log ends and he clung to it.

"Yippee!" yelled Shorty Latham. "That's two of us got a soakin'!"

With mighty little trouble, Diego got the ferry moving again, toward the shore where the Shiprock men waited.

"Just a matter of windin' some wire around the guide cable at the place where they wanted 'er stopped," Shorty said, as he clambered over the rail. "Nella an' Diego had it all figured out by the time I got here. Seemed like a good idee, because if we just took the raft over to the far side, them owlhoots might still make a run for it an' get away. I rode along under the deckin', just in case. Gil, do you aim to stand all night with your mouth open?"

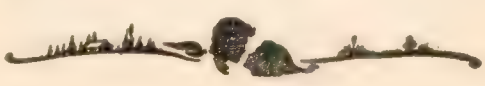
"Nope. Waitin' for you to untie my hands, you lop-eared cowpunch. When I propose to a gal I aim to have my arms around her so she can't get away."

Shorty whooped and started loosening the rope. But Gil didn't really need to talk any more, he could see his answer glowing in Nella's eyes.

"You'll have to give up tryin' to run this ol' raft," he warned her, grinning. "I still don't see why you ever thought it was worth runnin'."

Her chin came up, and the toe of one of her boots traced an aimless design on the deck planks. "A girl has to do something to get herself noticed," she said. "You never would pay the least bit of attention to me when you saw me there in town."

She didn't say any more. And the toe of her boot didn't do any more meandering on the planks, either. Because Gil's arms were free now, and Nella was lifted plumb into the air.



Bombing Ranges and Beef

By Jess Taylor

He had worked himself into a lean leather string, but the cattle were fat

What happened to the New Mexican ranches used for bomber practice during the war? Here's a story of the slow comeback of one

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LT. JOHN T. HARDY was going home, back to his TX ranch in New Mexico. He scrunched his lean body down into a comfortable position in the chaircar seat, caressed his service button with his chin and fed his hungry eyes on the scrubby mesquite and creosote bushes marching past the window.

Jack Hardy wondered what the old ranch would look like, what the war had done to it. His tired mind found its way back to the day just before he had gone into the Air Corps, to the time when he and his father had been gathering the last stragglers of cattle from the ranch. Their hundred-section outfit had been leased to the government for a bombing range.

He smiled wryly now as he recalled that last roundup. The family had been moved off the ranch to town. Most of the cattle had been bunched and were now on their way to the shipping pens. But the count had revealed some stragglers left behind, including an old cowhorse of his by the name of Legs.

Jack had gone in search of Legs. It was fresh in his mind now how worried he had been at the prospect of old Legs being left behind out there on the range by himself, with bombs dropping all around him. And as he'd ridden over a rise, he'd seen Legs grazing near one of the new bombing targets. What if the bombers came over now? They hadn't started using the targets yet, except to fly over them every day, but Jack knew they might begin any time.

Seeing a bomber coming, Jack whistled

to Legs, and the old horse lifted his head and neighed. The bomber was heading straight for the target. Somehow Jack was sure it was going to drop a bomb! And Legs was not more than a hundred yards from where the bomb would fall—if the rookie laid his egg with any accuracy, nearer if the bomb went wide.

Jack spurred toward Legs. His young eyes saw the bomb leave the plane and arch toward the target.

Yelling a warning to Legs, he drove to the rescue. The plane roared overhead as the bomb struck. He heard a muffled chug and saw a cloud of dust. Legs snorted, kicked up his old heels and got away from there fast. When Jack found that Legs wasn't hurt, he laughed all the way back to the herd.

He was smiling now as he swung his service bag off the train at the station. His mother and father and sister were there to meet him, and it wasn't long until he asked the old rancher about the TX outfit.

"It's still there, son," said Tom Hardy, "but in a hell of a fix."

"Howcome?" asked Jack, surprised. "I'd of thought the rest would do it good."

"Well, the grass is some better," conceded the rancher, "but that's about all. The fences are down. Windmills've gone to pot. Tanks busted. Corrals rotted to pieces. Ranch house full of holes and pack-rats. And the coyotes thicker than fleas."

"Wouldn't they let you on there to keep things up?" Jack wanted to know.

Old Tom Hardy didn't answer immediately. Jack thought he saw a big change in his father. He seemed discouraged, uninterested. He finally cleared his throat and said, "Reckon they would, but I wasn't hankerin' to get shot or bombed."

"Shot!" Jack couldn't help laughing.

"You can laugh if you want to," said Tom, "but that ain't no fairy tale. Most of them kids was all right, I guess. But some of 'em was trigger-happy enough to shoot at anything with them machine guns and cannons. And not all of 'em was satisfied to dump their bombs on them targets. They liked moving things better, like a cow or a horse. Or maybe a man."

"There wasn't much of that, Dad," reasoned Jack. "I was one of them, and I know."

"That's right," admitted Tom, trying to be fair. "But one would have been plenty for me. I know the Army did ever'thing they could to keep it down. But they couldn't know all that was goin' on."

THE FACTS indicate that Jack and not his father was right. There were very few reported cases of stock killed by bombs or gunfire. And none of human beings that I know of. The ranchers were supposed to move their cattle off the ranches when they leased them for bombing ranges. Not all of them did so. At least, not all of the cattle were removed from every ranch. Some cowmen were willing to take the chance, and their losses were low. Lower than the loss many of them took by selling their stock and not having the income from it during the war years.

The TX spread, like most of the land used for bombing purposes, is very poor range. A whole section of this country will not take care of more than six cows, year around. This is especially true of certain areas, such as the Alamogordo Bombing Range and the Atomic Bomb Proving Grounds. Some of this land is covered with a deposit of white sand and lava beds. Jackrabbits have a hard time finding enough to eat in the sand dunes, and even rattlesnakes do only fairly well in the lava beds. They would not do that well if they ate grass.

Yet Jack Hardy wanted to go back to the TX ranch. The war was over now, and the TX was his home. He loved the range. Ranching is good business, when run right. Jack Hardy was ready to try his hand at making the TX pay off. He felt it was the thing to do, with meat scarce and cattle at a high price.

During the war there were over 12,000,000 acres of grazing land withdrawn from private use for military purposes. Over a hundred ranchmen were affected. An estimated 160,000 head of cattle were removed from these ranches, many of them sold and butchered. With the war over, the Southwest must look to the rebuilding and restocking of these ranges.

Jack was up against several hard prob-

Legs snorted, kicked up his heels and got away from there fast

lems. Could he get his ranch back from government lease? If he couldn't get it back immediately, could he work out a plan by which he would be allowed to move onto the ranch? How could he restock the range with cattle? How much work would have to be done on the old place to put it back into shape?

Upon investigation, he found the lease was still in effect. He got his father to turn things over to him, and though it was a tedious matter, Jack finally got the government to cancel the lease. His real work was still to be done. The old ranch had to be put back on its feet. Cowboys had to be found and hired, cowhorses bought. And he had to have cattle.

The Hardy family moved back on the TX. Tom Hardy was all stiffened up from a quarter century of hard range life and lacked the heart to start all over again. However, he was wise in ranch gumption and ready to advise young Jack in the risky work before him.

JACK sat down and figured up how things stood. Fortunately he had some money. There was the income from the sale of the cattle, and the lease rentals, plus what he had saved out of his service pay. But it would take a lot of cash to do this job up right.

The cattle would cost him a little fortune. He had a hundred sections of land, all clear of debt. At six cows per section, he would need six hundred head of cattle. He couldn't hope to get good, young range cows for less than $80 a piece. They would probably run nearer $100. Registered or even high-grade bulls would cost much more than that. About the least he could expect the restocking of the ranch to cost him would be $50,000. That is, if he could find the cattle to buy. Choice two-year-old heifers were scarce on the market. The Cattle Growers' Association reported that no such animals had been for sale for sev eral months.

In spite of this, Jack pitched in. He put a bunch of hands to work fixing up the windmills and the fences and the dirt water-tanks. A couple of surplus-commodity trucks were bought.

He found it harder to get cowhorses. During the war ranchers had let their stock of range horses run down. They had some old cowhorses, but Jack wanted only young ones. He had to settle for a remuda of broncs and have them broken.

While his father was looking after things on the ranch, Jack set out to get his cattle. He hardly knew where to look. He didn't want old stuff. If he had to start from scratch, he would buy only two-year-old

heifers, so he'd be set for several years.

He went to cattle sales in places like Albuquerque and El Paso, and Amarillo and Midland over in the Panhandle of Texas. Disappointment awaited him. The stock was pretty high-priced, especially bulls. He bought a few blooded young sires here and there and shipped them to the ranch.

But heifers were hard to find. Ranchers were wise to the future. They had not sold much during price controls, just enough to pay expenses and keep down overstocking. Jack found plenty of old cows, but ranchers wanted to keep the heifers for range stock.

Jack had to have young cows. Naturally he preferred to buy them in big bunches, but he soon saw that this was out of the question. So he began picking up whatever number he could find, ten and fifteen at a time, and trucking them to the TX. It was slow work and discouraging. He felt it might be years before he could get the ranch stocked.

Yet he kept at it. Deep down into Texas he went. He put ads in stockmen's journals, talked appealingly to officials of cattle growers' associations, contacted every cattle buyer he could find.

After months of whipping the bushes, he had some four hundred head. He had worked himself into a lean leather string but things were looking up. The grass on the TX was the best it had been for years. The cattle were fat and would winter all right, without feed.

All Jack had to worry about now was veal on the hoof, ready for market. He would have to wait for that. He told me not long ago that he was expecting about a 40% calf drop. That is awfully low. Ranchers usually look for around 80%. But Jack had got some of his cows too late for breeding, and every ranchman avoids winter calves.

With the removal of ceiling prices on cattle, Jack stands a good chance of coming out pretty well. He will have about 160 calves. If he sold all of them, he would get about $15,000. But good ranchers keep the best heifers for range seed.

I am guessing that Jack will dump around three carloads—some hundred and twenty head—on the market and be satisfied with ten or eleven thousand dollars. He won't have much cash after paying expenses. But he'll be happy with his prospects, and that's what counts in ranching.

LONE STAR FUGITIVES

FOR OVER half a century it has been a common thing in New Mexico to hear ranchfolks say jokingly of any newcomer whose antecedents are unknown, "like as not he whipped a long-tailed pony out of Texas about three jumps ahead of a sheriff." Sometimes it's a "burr-tailed pony," sometimes it's "the Rangers" instead of "a sheriff." Sometimes they say "he matched a hoss race in Texas an' won it in New Mexico." Or "the Rangers give him three days to git out of Texas an' he gave 'em back two of 'em." Or "he immigrated to New Mexico a-leanin' plumb ahead of his saddle horn an' watchin' his trail for a sheriff."

Though more often than not spoken as a joke, such talk about wanted men running into the Territory of New Mexico to escape the law in Texas had a lot of foundation in fact. Proof of this situation is to be found in a Black Book issued by the State of Texas in 1878, an official list of the names of 4,402 fugitives wanted for some offense in the Lone Star State. Despite the great number listed, the Black Book's preface explained that it was incomplete because "forty counties had not yet reported!" Rating highest for number of badmen wanted was Rusk County, with 282, while the average from 108 Texas counties was 40 each.

Rewards were offered for many of these runaways, in a total amount right around $100,000. Not all of these fugitives, of course, had fled to New Mexico. But particularly in the '70's Mexico, New Mexico, Colorado and the Neutral Strip of Indian Territory were the principal places of refuge for the Lone Star's wanted men. In justice it should be added that not all fugitives were actually confirmed criminals. The times were rough, feuds of the range were many, and killings took place between men who were otherwise honest, upright citizens. Often the survivor, instead of waiting to stand trial, simply lit a shuck for new country—which usually meant somewhere to westward. Once there they often lived out their lives as respected, law-abiding citizens.

Only a few years ago a man who had lived for fifty years in New Mexico as a respected citizen, but under an assumed name, tried, through friends, to get permission from the Governor and Attorney General of Texas to return without jeopardy from a charge of murder which had been laid against him before "he matched a hoss race with the Rangers." His request was refused, however, and he lived out his life and was buried in the little New Mexico town where he had found refuge so many years ago.——*Phil Squires*

The Halloway Hellions

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

THE BRASS BAND that tooted a welcome hid from Wendy the ruthless violence rooted in her home town—until she encountered death, swinging gently from a crossbar in the night

PART ONE

LOTS of people have a secret hope, whether they will admit it or not, that one day they will go back to the old home town and find a band waiting to greet them. It happens that Wendy Holloway had never thought of such a thing, but when she came back to Singing Woman she got the band just the same. It was no great shakes as a band: Ike Townsend, the little faro dealer at the Golden Glow Saloon, was working hard on an ancient and battered instrument that must once have been a cornet; "Judge" Harrison Parnell, a man with a smattering of legal knowledge and an inordinate love of other people's horseflesh, was pounding a drum and not keeping very good time; and only old Doc Lathrop, with his slide trombone, seemed to be producing anything that resembled music. Just the same, the spirit was there. The moment Wendy stepped off the train and the autumn breeze picked up her auburn hair, the band began to play. Wendy heard them and saw who it was, and for a minute there was a lump in her throat, and she could not see much because of the mist in her eyes.

Then Wendy spotted her mother and ran toward her. Ma Holloway's arms swept around her, engulfing her. Ma still topped

"Get!" the man snapped angrily.

her daughter by inches, although Wendy was now full grown.

"Oh, but it's good to be back," sighed Wendy.

"Huh!" said her mother, dabbing at her eyes, "Been a lot better if you'd stayed on in Frisco and finished your schoolin'."

Wendy ignored that remark, not taking it seriously. She stepped back, looked around her. "But Johnny," she said. "Where's he?"

Ma Holloway did not answer. She had little chance to, because as if by prearrangement the members of the band and a few other citizens of the town crowded around at that instant to offer their greetings. For the next few moments Wendy was swamped and only vaguely remembered that an odd look had come over her mother's face when she asked about her youngest brother.

"Well," said Ma at last, "let's get goin'. Plenty of chance to tell the folks about Frisco after you're squared away. Got you fixed up with a nice room at the Lathrops'."

Wendy looked sharply at her mother. "What's the matter with the Golden Glow?" she asked.

"Humph," said her mother. "No room there. You came too sudden-like, Wendy."

They had started up the street, with

"Drop that paper and move. I won't stop at killing a woman!"

their friends trailing them. Wendy stopped short.

"Why," she said, "you're still living there, aren't you?"

"That's different," Ma Holloway said shortly. "I've got to. You don't."

"That doesn't matter," Wendy said. "It's good enough for me. Since when have the Holloways gotten so respectable that they can't go near their own place of business?"

"Things have changed," her mother answered. "Singin' Woman ain't the kind of town it used to be, since the railroad came through. It's no place for a young lady."

"Oh." Wendy was beginning to understand a lot of things. The delay she had experienced in getting out on the stage from San Francisco. That was Ma Holloway, up to her usual finagling. Her mother had

"The fact is, Wendy—" Ike Townsend began. But Ma Holloway silenced him with a look.

"Right now, Wendy," she said, "the place is kind of busy. Cattle drives just comin' north. That kind of thing. And—"

"Then this is just the time I want to see it."

For a moment they looked at each other, their glances locking. It was hard to believe that anyone could face down Ma Holloway, close to six feet tall and sturdy, ruddy cheeked despite her white hair. But her daughter did not turn away.

They had not stopped. The three men walked just behind them, anxiety on their faces. They had seen Ma Holloway with her dander up before.

But they were abreast the Golden Glow now. It was too late for any more words.

really meant it when she had said she did not want her to come home. Wendy half smiled, and thrust her chin out in determination. "I'll get along," she said. "And I'm not going to be boarded out."

Doc Lathrop had sensed what was going on and eased up to them. "The Missus has got a nice room fixed up for you, Wendy," he said. "We'd sure like to have you."

Wendy smiled at him, started up the street again. The doctor had been almost a father to her, in the days when she was a harum-scarum tomboy. She did not want to hurt his feelings. On the other hand, she had to find out what this was all about. Was her mother in some kind of trouble? It hardly seemed possible, but something was surely wrong.

"Thank you, Doc," she said. "I'll think about it. But first of all, I've got to have a look at the Golden Glow. It wouldn't seem right not to look the old place over."

As if this were exactly what was expected of her, Wendy turned to walk inside.

She did not need to go that far to know that the Golden Glow had changed. Once it had been only a one-room restaurant, with a kitchen in the rear. Then a bar had been added, "to keep up with the needs of the times," as Ma had said. But the new addition went much further than that. Now it was the Golden Glow Saloon, Restaurant and Dance Palace, a glittering array of false fronts that stretched across three buildings, the center one three stories high. In contrast to most of the rest of the town, these buildings had even been painted recently.

"Why," said Wendy, "I didn't expect this."

"Had to do it," her mother said. "Minute the railroad touched town, folks had to have noise and gals and such. I was losin' business to the folks across the street."

"Of course," Wendy agreed. Noise and girls—dance hall girls. So that was why Ma Holloway hadn't wanted her daughter to go to the Golden Glow.

"Anyhow," said Ma Holloway with a touch of pride, "I don't expect you find 'em much fancier than this even in Frisco."

"No-o," Wendy admitted. "I guess not."

IT TOOK no intuition for Wendy to know, the moment she stepped inside the Golden Glow, that something was wrong. The dance hall girls were there, all right, huddled in a tight little knot at the far end of the room. In front of them stood Luke Henry, the bartender, talking to a tall, broad-shouldered man in cowman's clothes that were liberally sprinkled with trail dust. It was too early in the day to expect many customers in the Golden Glow. Judging from the loud voice in which the stranger was lambasting Luke Henry, and the ready bung-starter in Luke's hand, probably any customers who had been present had scattered at this sign of impending trouble.

Wendy had no chance to catch the drift of the stranger's speech. As soon as she and her mother were inside the door, Luke nodded in their direction.

"There's the boss," he said, and it sounded like relief in his voice. What was the matter with Luke, Wendy wondered. Couldn't he even take care of early afternoon drunks out to cause trouble any more?

Only this man was not, she realized quickly, any early afternoon drunk. He had turned and started toward them, and there was nothing drunken about his walk. He was a young man, dark-haired, and if there had not been anger in his face, he might even have been called handsome.

Seeing the two women, he hesitated, looking momentarily abashed. But the look vanished quickly. He removed his black sombrero but came toward them in a very determined fashion.

"Ma'am," he announced to Ma Holloway, "I didn't know I was going to have to say this to a woman—but it's got to be said where it'll do some good. It's no use talkin' to that shifty-eyed bartender."

MA HOLLOWAY scowled. She squared her shoulders, put her hands on her hips, assuming what Wendy knew to be her fighting pose.

"There's nothing wrong with Luke Henry or Luke Henry's eyes," she snapped. "Nothing a little sunshine wouldn't cure. If you're going to talk around here, young man, you'll keep a civil tongue in your head."

"I didn't come here to be civil," he said, undaunted. "I came here to state some facts. And I aim to be listened to."

"If they're facts, I'll listen," Ma Holloway shot back. "Spit 'em out, cowboy."

"Ma'am," he said, "I've been in these trail town joints before. I don't reckon yours is any better or worse than the rest. If I was on my own I wouldn't care. This time I ain't. I've got a dozen punchers and three thousand head of Pitchfork cattle comin' up the trail from Texas. They'll be in town tomorrow."

"Just keep the cows out of my place," said Ma Holloway. "I can take care of the punchers—even Texans."

"That's exactly what I figured," the young man said angrily. "You'll take care of 'em—cheatin' 'em, dopin' their drinks, robbin' 'em and knifin' 'em in the back!"

"Why, you low-down liar!" Ma Holloway burst out. "I run an honest place here in the Golden Glow. I don't want to hear—"

"That's what they all say," he interrupted. "I told you I've been in these joints before."

"Then if you don't like 'em," she snapped, "why don't you stay out of 'em? Nobody asked you in."

"I'm not here for myself," he told her. "I'm here for my punchers.. A man's been on the trail for two-three months. He's got to do the town when he's through, have some fun. These joints are the only place he's got. He's willin' to spend his money. He don't have to be robbed."

"And he don't have to tear the joint apart either," Ma said. "Fun is fun, but you Texans don't need to think you own the earth because you've got a few drinks under your belt."

WENDY was furious. She could not see why her mother hadn't just slapped this insolent cowman down. She looked longingly at the bung-starter Luke Henry held in his hand. But Luke was not giving it up, and he was staying in the background, not going to take any further part in this battle unless he had to. She looked around the room for another weapon.

"That's it," the young man said. "Blamin' the Texans. We bring you the beef and we bring you the money, but that ain't enough for tinhorn gamblers and painted Jezebels. You've got to rob and cheat and kill. A man can smell the stink of the trail towns all the way to Texas—and they tell me this one is the worst of the lot."

Ma Holloway took a step toward him. The muscles in her right arm were knotting and her face was angry. But he did not seem to notice. He stood his ground, pointed a finger at her.

"There's just one thing I'm tellin' you," he snarled. "I'm not singin' psalms. I'm not askin' my boys to keep out of places like this. But I'm warnin' you and every other joint in this town. Take their money honest. Sell 'em whatever you've got to sell. After that, you leave the Pitchfork boys alone. If you don't—"

"Mister," Ma Holloway said, "I don't like your talk and I don't like your looks. We don't sell doped drinks in the Golden Glow, if that's what you're talkin' about. Men can win at our gamblin' tables and walk out with their winnin's—if they've got sense enough to do it. Now get out. I'm sick of your insults."

He ignored her last words. He did not see Wendy bearing down upon him. "Maybe you're right," he said as if he did not believe her. "I'll find out. And I'm tellin' you—if a single Pitchfork man comes to harm in here, I'm comin' back and tear this joint—"

He did not finish. Five and a half feet of auburn-haired fury was upon him. From the corner at the end of the bar, Wendy Holloway had seized a swamper's mop. She came at him swinging it high, and the first blow struck him full in the chest.

"Get out!" she shrieked. She swung the mop again, and it hit him in the face. He backed away, his hands coming up to defend himself. But Wendy kept after him, flailing him back toward the swinging doors, shouting. "Didn't you hear Ma tell you to get out?"

He reached the doors, backed through them. Wendy stopped, her anger gone with her efforts, a little ashamed of herself now. The young man's head was thrust back through the swinging doors. His sombrero was on his head, and he had recovered a little of his aplomb.

"I'll say this, Ma'am," he told Ma Halloway. "Your gals sure stick up for you."

With that he was gone. Wendy stood there, the mop upraised in her hand again. But this time she did not strike.

Only her mother moved. She crossed the room with swift, long strides, her face dead white with anger. "The dirty, low-down—" she said.

She swung wide the doors. She was too late. Already the Texan was in his saddle, loping down the street. Ma Holloway turned back, and it seemed to Wendy that suddenly she looked old.

"You shouldn't be drivin' out the customers, Wendy," was all she said. But Wendy knew what she was thinking.

LESS than two years ago, Ma Holloway remembered, Singing Woman had been a town with not much past and less future. A little town set in the midst of good cattle country, with some gold coming down from the surrounding hills to add a flavor of prosperity. But the gold was sent on to the railhead by wagon freight, and after the fall roundups the beef cattle were driven to the same destination. Everyone knew that the railhead was slowly moving farther west, but everyone also knew that it was going to cut through the mountains at Twin Buttes Pass, nearly a hundred miles to the south. In the long run, that would not make much difference to Singing Woman—two hundred miles, mostly through valley and plain, to the eastward, or half that distance through rougher country to the south. Singing Woman would

still be just a way station on the road to the fabulous East.

Alone among the townsfolk, Ma Holloway was not willing to let things be settled that way. Or at least, she was the only one who attempted to do something about it. First she talked it over with her oldest son Rand, home on vacation from law school. Then, as her scheme developed, she went to Kane Lisbee, the local banker, for financing.

It was not the first time Kane Lisbee had turned Ma Holloway down on one of her schemes for expansion; she supposed it would not be the last. She did not let it discourage her; she dug into her own savings and found other ways to raise the additional money needed. The railroad, she found, had been satisfied with the results of its surveyors to the south. Very well, she would conduct her own survey. She did so, and found out a few things that she thought would open the eyes of the railroad magnates, if only she could get to them.

That was where Rand, soft-voiced and smooth-spoken, came into the picture. He took a trip east, arranged meetings, saw people. He made considerable talk about a hunting expedition after big-horn sheep. Not all of the men he wanted were interested, but some of them were. The president of the railroad was among the latter.

By this time Ma's funds were running low. Perhaps she would have to call Wendy back from San Francisco; perhaps Rand would never get to finish law school. But she took a chance, and staked everything on what was to come.

Johnny, youngest of the Holloways, guided the hunting trip. It was a fair success. But that was only bait. The big time must be the banquet to be held for the hunters at the Golden Glow, on the evening of the day the hunt was ended. On that Ma Holloway staked her reputation, her hopes for a future for her three children and mighty near everything else she had.

THAT night the Golden Glow was closed to normal business, since the main room was needed for the banquet. Not many of the residents of Singing Woman were invited—a few old friends like Dr. Lathrop and Judge Parnell, Kane Lisbee for policy's sake and two or three others—but the word got around just the same. The banquet was talked about for months thereafter, in bunkhouses and sourdoughs' shacks, and with each telling the legend of it grew.

It was quite a banquet, even without the embellishments imaginative men gave to it later. There was imported champagne, chilled to just the right temperature. There was breast of pheasant and venison steak. There were speckled trout from the nearby streams. There were wines and even green vegetables, and all this was topped off by Ma Holloway's famous pies, baked by her own hand. She had been so worried about these that she had sent the regular cook from the kitchen while she was baking them.

It is doubtful if the railroad magnates suspected that Ma Holloway had baked these pies herself. That night, she did not look as if such things as cooking troubled her. She looked more like an opera star from the East, suitably gowned, or at the very least like the wife of an ex-sourdough who had struck it rich a long time ago and gotten used to it. The gown she wore had cost her almost her last cent of spare cash, but it was needed.

When the pies had been consumed and the railroad men, filled with food and well mellowed with wine, had settled down to good Havana cigars, coffee and cognac, Ma Holloway got up to speak. She had already let fall the seeds of her idea in casual conversations during dinner. Now she gave it to them straight from the shoulder, in the only way she knew how to do.

"I guess you know I've enjoyed having you here," she said. "But you're business men, so I expect you also know that I didn't bring you here just to hunt bighorns and eat. There's a matter of a railroad that's headed through Twin Buttes Pass."

SHE went on to tell them of the survey she had had made. "I checked my figures with the ones from your own survey," she said. "Don't ask me how I got your figures. But I found out that by

the time you get to the Coast, you'll have saved twenty miles and at least a couple of bad grades if you use the northern route."

She did not wait for them to ask her if her survey had gone clear to the Coast, which it had not, but went on quickly: "I don't expect twenty miles means much to millionaires, but that's not the main point anyhow. If you come this way, you'll tap the rich Wyoming cattle and mining country right at the source. And the farther you go to the south, the nearer you're getting to the road that's building through that way. You'll get there first, but that won't stop the competition in the end. And if you come up here, nobody's goin' to build north of you."

Ma Holloway had more to say about the advantages of putting the road through Singing Woman, but that was the gist of her argument. The railroad men listened at first because it was the most comfortable thing to do, but in the end because they wanted to listen. When she was through, they crowded around her, questioned her about the survey and the region.

Within a month, Ma Holloway learned that the railroad was coming to Singing Woman.

She had a moment of quiet triumph when she got the news. She called in Doc Lathrop and Judge Parnell, and gave them a drink in honor of the occasion. But this time it was not champagne—there was no money left for that. To prove her point, she had had to make the gesture of offering scotfree to the railroad the results of her survey. The railroad had taken it. For the moment, Ma Holloway had risked everything and profited nothing by her venture, and for many months ahead the going would be tough.

Somehow, she had gotten through. Perhaps the portions of food served at the Golden Glow had grown a little smaller; perhaps there had been a dash of water in the liquor served at the bar. It would be hard to prove these things; and at any rate, Rand Holloway had gone back to law school and Wendy had stayed in San Francisco.

These minor worries ended when the

road at last came through and Singing Woman became the local Hell on Wheels. Money matters no longer troubled the owner of the Golden Glow. She could bask in the spreading sunshine of her accomplishment, sit back and watch her children grow to maturity in the way she had wanted them to grow.

At least, that was what Ma Holloway had thought. Now, looking at Wendy as her daughter followed her into Ma's rooms above the Golden Glow, she was not so sure. It had all gone a little sour. A lot of new people had moved in with the railroad—gamblers, toughs, shifty-eyed folks who had no apparent means of making a living. A man named Spike Dean had set up a gambling hall and dance palace across the street from the Golden Glow. Ma had soon realized that even the good food for which the Golden Glow was noted was not quite enough to meet this new competition. So she had had to expand, add her own dance hall and the girls who went with it. It was not quite the setup for Wendy to come home to—not for a girl who was clear-eyed and young, tall and slender and beautiful.

BUT right now Wendy was smiling cheerfully, quite unperturbed at being mistaken by the Texan for a dance hall girl.

"I'll bet he won't come back next time with such a big chip on his shoulder," she said. She looked around. "Why, Ma, you've got lots of room here. Much better

than the way we lived in the old days. Of course I can stay with you."

"Wendy," her mother said grimly, "I'm shippin' you East tomorrow. You got to have more schoolin'."

"Schooling?" Wendy said. "What do you want me to do, turn into a school teacher? Anyhow, Randy's going to get enough education for the whole family."

"You always was a tomboy," Ma said, "but you don't have to stay ignorant like me."

Wendy walked over and shook her mother playfully. "Don't you dare talk like that," she said. "You've done all right. What do you think I came back for, anyway, if it wasn't because I was somesick? And tired of the city. I want to stay here, Ma. This is the country for me to grow up with—the same as it always has been."

"Not the same," Ma said.

"What do you mean? It's a little rougher, maybe—but I can stand that."

"Not just a little rougher. Wendy, this ain't even the same town any more. It wasn't just the railroad—there had to be a rich gold strike up on Squaw Man Creek right afterward. Now there's crooks runnin' wild, killin's most every day. Cattle are rustled from the drives. Gold gets hijacked from the wagons bringing it in. Why, the citizens can't even run their own town any more—let alone keepin' the neighborhood straight."

"What's wrong with the law?" Wendy asked.

"Law?" Ma shrugged. "Lem Hanson's sheriff. He does the best he can, I expect, but he don't even scratch the surface. We ain't even had a town marshal for a month. The death rate was too high."

"There are ways to clean up towns like this, aren't there? Why don't the honest citizens start a vigilante group?"

"Vigilantes? Huh." Ma shrugged again. "Maybe they have. Who knows."

"Maybe they have," said Wendy, smiling, "and maybe Ma Holloway is one of the leaders. And maybe that's why she doesn't want her daughter around."

"Wendy," said her mother, "you've sure got a big imagination. Me a vigilante? Why, they wouldn't have me if I wanted in. They're respectable folk. You saw what I had to do to keep up with Spike Dean's competition."

OF COURSE I did," Wendy assured her. "And you know, I've just been thinking of some more things you could do. Why stop with just the dance hall and saloon? Why not build a stage in back, have singers and maybe even a real show sometimes? Make it like a regular big city place. That would draw the folks away from Spike Dean's. And when the town quiets down, you'd really have something to build on."

Wendy's enthusiasm was infectious. For a moment her mother's eyes lighted. But she shook her head.

"I've got enough troubles on my hands

now," she said, "without makin' them bigger."

"You mean," said Wendy, "you're too doggoned worried about being respectable. So your children can be respectable. Why Ma!"

"It's not too much to ask, is it?" Ma said gloomily. "I expect it's what I've been workin' for, all these years. I want you to live like a lady."

"Well, you can just stop worrying." Wendy too was serious now. "To think that Ma Holloway, who's raised herself and her whole family by her own bootstraps, would start getting troubled about being respectable. Do you think we're not proud of you? Don't you think you've raised us well enough to know we'll be all right?"

Ma Holloway got up, walked across the room. Her eyes were moist. She stood looking out the window for a long time, as if trying to make up her mind about something. Finally she turned and faced her daughter.

"Not Johnny," she said.

"What?" said Wendy.

"You asked where Johnny was at the station, and I didn't tell you. Johnny's gone bad."

Wendy caught her breath. "I—I don't believe it." She couldn't, either. She was remembering tow-headed Johnny when they were little, playing together. How good-natured he was, and how wide his blue eyes were. If anybody got them into trouble as kids, it was always Wendy—and never Johnny.

"It happened slow-like," Ma said, "so I hardly noticed it. I'd picked him to run the Golden Glow. Never could get him interested. He was always wanderin' off. Finally he got a job punchin' cows. That didn't worry me so much—till I found out he was hangin' around Spike Dean's every time he come to town. Next thing I knew, he'd lost his job. Then the gold strike came along. He took to wanderin' around town with some drunken old sourdough. Pretty soon he headed out of town with that no-good drunk." Ma sighed and her shoulders drooped.

BUT I guess huntin' gold wasn't wild enough for him. Because next thing I heard, he'd taken up with a gang of toughs that's supposed to be stealin' the gold and killin' folks."

"But where is he now?" Wendy asked. "Haven't you heard from him—something at least?"

"He's somewhere up in the hills around Squaw Man Creek," her mother answered wearily. "No, I don't hear from him. I just hear about him."

"But Ma," said Wendy. "You ought to talk to him. Johnny was such a good kid."

"Course he was a good kid," Ma said fiercely. "All my kids was good kids. It ain't his fault. It's this blasted town. Women and liquor and loose livin' all around him. How can a boy grow up decent? And it's my fault too—I got the railroad in. Wendy, you've got to get out of here. I mean it."

Wendy walked over, put her hand upon her mother's arm, looked up at her affectionately.

"But I can't," she said. "Of course I can't now. There's nobody left till Randy comes back. I wouldn't leave you alone. And I wouldn't leave anyhow, till I'd seen Johnny. And that's final."

"Huh," said Ma. She scowled down at her daughter as if she hoped to frighten her away with a look, but Wendy looked right back at her. Ma shrugged. "You win. You've got too doggoned much of your mother in you, Wendy."

Wendy smiled. "That's fine," she said. But she wasn't sure that it was. Her mother's surrender had been too easy. It wasn't like Ma Holloway to back down on anything. Maybe she still had something up her sleeve.

Wendy did not have a chance to figure out just what, if anything, was back of her mother's submission, because at that moment a knock sounded on the door. "Come in!" Ma Holloway said bruskly. The door opened, and a tall, neatly dressed man entered.

It was Kane Lisbee, the local banker, who had dropped in to welcome Wendy home.

OVER across the street in Spike Dean's Wagon Wheel, Lee Vickery, trail boss of the Pitchfork trail herd, was having a quiet beer with Spike Dean himself. He had come here on the same errand that had taken him to the Golden Glow some time before, but his reception here had been quite different. He had hardly begun to lay down the law before Dean assured him he knew just how he felt. The Pitchfork men, he declared, would have no trouble in the Wagon Wheel.

Lee was still a little puzzled at how easily it had all gone. Spike Dean's looks were not exactly prepossessing. He was dark and beetle-browed, short and sort of oily in appearance, but he certainly could act pleasant. Maybe there were some good folks in this town after all, in spite of its reputation. Lee was beginning to wonder if maybe he hadn't been a mite overbearing over there in the Golden Glow. Being chased out with a swab by that red-haired gal had toned him down a little, and he had come in here in a little quieter mood. She was certainly full of fire, that gal, and as pretty as could be.

Well, he couldn't help it. You had to be tough with these folks. It was the only way. Lee's father had dumped a lot of responsibility in his hands, and he was young enough to feel it very keenly. He had the Pitchfork herd and the Pitchfork punchers to worry over. He knew what these end-of-railroad towns were like, and he would play this thing the only way he knew.

While Lee was thinking these things, a short, lean individual entered the Wagon Wheel, walked up and spoke to Spike Dean. The man wore a black sombrero and black clothes. You could spot him for a tinhorn gambler as far as you could see him. Lee could not hear what the man said to Spike Dean, but he saw Dean scowl. Then he put a hand on Lee's shoulder.

"Sorry, Mr. Vickery," he said. "This gent seems to think he's got some business to talk to me about. Reckon I'll have to listen. Now remember—if your boys want to do a little mild hell-raisin', you bring them to the Wagon Wheel. They'll be treated right. You can depend on Spike Dean."

LEE VICKERY nodded absently, his mind upon the red-haired girl who had chased him from the Golden Glow. Spike Dean and the gambler walked back to the office of the Wagon Wheel owner. There Dean offered his visitor a chair and a cigar.

"Now," said he, "what's this about havin' to see me in private?"

"I'm lookin' for a gent," the gambler said. "I figure you can help me."

"I ain't been here so long," Spike Dean said. "I don't know everybody."

"You know this man," the gambler told him. "I'm lookin' for the Boss, the real High Muck-a-Muck."

"I own this joint myself," Dean told him.

"I'm not talkin' about that. You know what I mean."

Dean's eyes flickered, and he looked sharply at the tinhorn. Then he shrugged. "I don't savvy your talk," he said. "It's all riddles to me."

"All right," said the gambler. "My name's Malloy. I used to deal faro for Ma Holloway."

"That a fact," said Dean. "Well, I don't need no faro dealers right now. Might be I would later."

"I'm not lookin' for a job," Malloy said. "Not exactly. But I've got reasons for not likin' Ma Holloway. She fired me—just for cold-deckin'. All I was doin' was makin' sure the house got its share."

Spike Dean scratched his hairy chest. "She do that?" he said. "The old fool. She won't last long in this town."

"Not if I've got anything to say about it," Malloy assured him. "I aim to get even—and I've got ideas. Several ideas. That Texan out there, for one thing. Now, will you get me to the Boss?"

"Boss?" said Dean. "You're still talkin' riddles."

"Look here, Dean," Malloy said, "I've been nosin' around for the past month. Up in the hills—other places. I found out plenty. You know damn well it's you that's talkin' riddles. There's somebody back of you—and back of the rest of the boys. You know who he is. I don't, or I wouldn't be here." He stood up. "Damn it, he'll thank you for takin' me to him."

Spike Dean smiled. He stood up, pressed a buzzer on the wall.

"Now," he said, "let's have a drink and take it easy. No use gettin' excited. Supposin' we just sit down and talk it over. Supposin' you tell me what it is you've got in mind."

KANE LISBEE stayed a long time talking to Wendy and her mother. He asked Wendy politely all about San Francisco. He discussed the weather and business prospects in the town. He asked a lot of questions. It seemed to Ma, knowing that Kane Lisbee did not usually waste words, that he was leading up to something, but she could not figure out what it was. The questions and the talk did not seem to add together to make anything.

She wondered, smiling faintly, if by any chance the banker was about to ask her to marry him again. That first time he had asked her had been quite a while ago. It was when she had gone to him for money to first expand the Golden Glow by adding a bar. She had come to him with a lot of facts and figures, sweated together at no small cost in energy to herself. She had thought they looked convincing, but they did not convince Kane Lisbee. A woman, he assured her after appearing to ponder the matter, had no place in business. And when she wanted to know how he expected her to keep alive, he looked at her and smiled. Ma Holloway was still fairly young then, and very easy to look at. Kane Lisbee told her that what she needed was a husband—himself, for example.

If the proposal had not been mixed in with the matter of the money she needed, Ma Holloway might have been less brusk in her answer. It seemed to her as if, having seen the figures, the banker was trying to marry the Golden Glow, not her. She had not told him quite that.

"If I'm not a good risk for borrowin'," she told him, "then I'm not a good risk for marryin'. I'm not takin' another husband till I've got no favors to ask from him. Till we can look each other in the eye, man to man."

At that point she stalked out of the bank, leaving Kane Lisbee murmuring something about the possibility of reconsidering the loan. He was angry that she did not wait to hear him out. He was even more annoyed, she could plainly see, when the Golden Glow expanded without assistance from him, marital or otherwise. The fact that Harrison Parnell had a hand in the proceedings did not help matters any.

WHEN Harrison Parnell first came into Ma Holloway's life, he was not very presentable. His boots were worn through at the soles and his clothes at various other places. He needed a shave. He walked into the Golden Glow Restaurant, sat down and ordered a cup of coffee. In spite of the fact that he did not run to leanness, he looked hungry.

"You need a sight more than a cup of coffee," Ma told him.

"Madam," he said with a certain seedy dignity, "what I need is entirely irrelevant. What I am going to pay for is a cup of coffee."

Ma chuckled and went way. She came back with a plate loaded with steak and hash-browned potatoes, bread and butter and vegetables. She also brought a cup of coffee. Harrison Parnell bristled as she set them down, but she could see that his mouth watered.

"I had to bring this other stuff," she said quickly. "It's a rule in the Golden Glow. First time a stranger sets foot in here, he has to eat a full meal on the house. It's a trick we have for gettin' him to stay on in Singin' Woman."

Harrison Parnell took a good mouthful of the steak before he spoke. "A very fine trick it is," he said. "Is the town short of inhabitants?"

"We can always use a good business man or two," Ma told him. "The town's goin' to boom one of these days, if it gets the right start." She smiled inwardly, thinking that this shabby bum would hardly be likely to do much in the way of business. But he surprised her. A few more bites of very fine steak had made him loquacious.

"No doubt," he said, "some people need legal advice. I am Judge Harrison Parnell, L.L.B. et cetera." He took another bite of the steak and a generous helping of potatoes.

"Then I also deal in horseflesh, sometimes —other people's."

Ma was taken back just a little. But she smiled, figuring that if this wasn't a joke she might as well take it as one.

"Judge," she said, "if you don't mind my sayin' so, it looks like the other people with the horseflesh must have found out about it lately."

He was too full of good food to be angry. He shrugged.

"Possibly," he admitted. "Or it could be that my present deplorable state is caused by the fact that I am also a collector of good whiskey. To me, a bottle of fine burbon is as beautiful as a splendid horse. But sometimes I collect too much of it."

"I guessed that," Ma assured him. "Still and all, if you could forget the horseflesh and some of the whiskey, I shouldn't wonder Singin' Woman could use a lawyer."

And so, with Ma's prodding and, in a small way, financial assistance, Harrison Parnell set himself up to offer legal advice to the citizens of Singing Woman. In time he became the local justice of the peace. He continued to deal in horses, occasionally, and Ma sometimes wondered if his legal right hand could countenance the deals made by his horse-trading left hand. He also continued to collect good whiskey in considerable quantities.

BUT IN SPITE of these faults, in a small way he had prospered. More, evidently, than Ma had realized. Because it was Harrison Parnell who had come forward with the loan of the money she needed for the first expansion of the Golden Glow. It must have been the horse-trading that did it.

Kane Lisbee had never asked Ma Holloway to marry him after that time. Sometimes she felt that he had never forgiven her for refusing him. Thus she was all the more surprised at his seemingly friendly interest in herself and her daughter today.

She did not get to find out the reason. He was still talking with apparent aimlessness when there came a knock on the outer door.

"Who is it?" Ma called.

"Harrison," an excited voice answered.

Abruptly, Kane Lisbee stood up. "Well," he said, "I must be going. And don't forget —if there's anything you need, just call on me."

Ma opened the door, and Judge Parnell hurried in. At sight of the banker, he stopped short. Kane Lisbee gave the barest perceptible nod and walked out the door.

"What's the trouble, Harrison?" Ma asked.

It was plain that there was trouble. The judge was not his usual unhurried self. He was puffing from exertion, and all two hundred pounds of him seemed to quiver. Obviously he had run all the way up the stairs.

"Ma," he said, "Doc Lathrop's disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Ma said. "Why, most likely he's out deliverin' somebody's baby or curin' a cough. He's hardly ever home."

"That's not it," the judge assured her. "I've been talking to Mrs. Lathrop. He went out to the Lazy Y to set a broken leg, early this afternoon. He was coming straight home. He never got there."

"Um," said Ma thoughtfully. "Still could be somebody asked him to go some place else."

"Possibly," the judge admitted. "I think not. I'm remembering that warning he got. I think he was on the track of something."

"Warning?" Wendy asked. "What warning? What's this all about?"

MA LOOKED sharply at the judge. He flushed. "I mean—" he began.

"That wasn't anything," Ma interrupted, purely for Wendy's benefit. "Just some locoed sourdough that hadn't paid his bill. But he could have hurt himself at that, Judge. Supposin' you and me mosey out toward the Lazy Y and kind of look the ground over, see which way he went. Doc always was a fool on a horse."

Ma Holloway was suddenly moving swiftly about, going into the bedroom to change into riding clothes, but all the while trying to seem unhurried to her daughter. Wendy was not deceived.

"I'll ride along with you, Ma," she said.

"Oh no, you—" Ma began. Then she said, in a softer tone, "Tell you what,

Wendy. Nothin's really happened, but you know how Mis' Lathrop worries. And she's over there at the house, all alone. You just go over there and keep her company till we locate Doc. That's the best thing you can do."

"If nothing's happened," Wendy said, "then why are you buckling on your pistol belt?"

Ma started. "Why, so I am," she admitted. Then she put her hands on her hips and glared at her daughter. "Wendy, you've got a lot of smart ideas for a girl your age. But you're still my daughter, and you still ain't quite growed up. And you're takin' orders from me. Do you hear that? You're not goin' anywhere. You're staying right in this town tonight—all night!"

Wendy backed away. It was along time since she had seen her mother like this. Not since she had had a fight with a little boy in the alley behind the Golden Glow, and come home bloody but unbeaten, had Ma Holloway laid down the law in such uncertain terms. Wendy wanted to smile now, but she did not dare.

"Yes, mother," she said. "I heard you. And I'm to go over to Mrs. Lathrop's and talk to her."

"Huh," said Ma, slightly mollified by her daughter's placating tone. "I should say so. You ain't too big yet for me to take over my knee if I have to."

She went out then, with the judge behind her. A little later, Wendy heard the sound of swift hoofbeats heading out of town.

WENDY did not leave the Golden Glow at once. For a while she walked the floor of her mother's rooms, trying to think this thing through. At first it had seemed simple. Because Ma Holloway had had to expand the Golden Glow into a dance hall, she had not wanted her daughter to come home. Now Wendy knew there was much more to it than that. There had been too much talk by her mother about what was happening in the town, and too many veiled remarks between her and the judge. And why were they both so alarmed because Doc Lathrop could not be located?

Something was brewing, that was sure, and it had to do with the lawless elements that had taken over the community. Had Ma Holloway, in spite of her denials, joined with a group that was trying to fight these people? If so, just where did Dr. Lathrop fit into the picture?

As far back as Wendy could remember, the doctor had been a genial, rather mild-mannered individual who spent all his waking hours in taking care of the sick folk of the community—except for taking a little time off to offer advice to Wendy and act as a substitute father to her. Otherwise, it was all he could do to keep himself and his wife alive, mainly because he did not have the heart to make folks pay for his services.

That was the way it had been, at least, until Ma Holloway got busy. Wendy could remember the day her mother came storming in, announcing that the doctor and his wife didn't even have enough food in the house for the next day's meals. Right after that she had ridden out of town at a gallop. And within the next few days, there was a veritable procession of cowpunchers, small ranchers and such, finding their way to the doctor's office. Wendy did not know exactly what had happened, but she could guess pretty well. If Ma Holloway came storming down on you and told you you had better pay your doctor's bills, you would most likely pay. And rather than face Ma Holloway's wrath again, you would probably continue to pay.

At any rate, Doc Lathrop and his wife did not seem to have any trouble getting enough to eat after that. The doctor even buoght a new horse and his wife a new dress. They seemed actually prosperous. It was shortly thereafter that the doctor got for himself the shiny new slide trombone from a mail order house.

But all this thinking did not really give Wendy an answer to the problems which were puzzling her. Maybe it would be a good idea at that to go over and talk to Mrs. Lathrop. The doctor fitted into this puzzled somewhere; perhaps she could find out just where. Besides, she had promised her mother to go over there.

She left the room, started down the stairs. The stairs led out through the rear

She swung the mop again, aiming at his face

entrance to the Golden Glow, but here just at the turn was a brief opening through which you could look down into the barroom. Perhaps Ma Holloway had arranged it that way intentionally.

At this time in the evening you would normally expect a blast of sound to come up at you from below. Right now it was strangely quiet. Wondering what the reason was, Wendy paused, looked through the railing. She started.

THE customers and bartenders of the Golden Glow stood with their hands in the air. Just inside the doorway, two masked men covered them with guns. A third was raking the money from the cash drawer. All of them were dressed in cowpuncher attire, with the peaked sombreros of the Southern ranges. The sombrero of one of those by the door was black, she noticed. The one next to him spoke.

"Just take it easy and you won't get hurt," he said. "We got nothin' against the customers. You're just suckers like the rest of us. But we want this here Golden Glow to know that folks from Texas don't like bein' pushed around."

Wendy did not wait to hear if the bandit said anything more. She whirled, raced up the stairs as quietly as possible. Somewhere in her mother's bureau there should be another gun, a short-barreled .38.

It seemed to take forever to find it. She hurried back down the stairs. She peered through the opening, bringing up the .38.

She was too late. The swinging doors had just closed behind the holdup men.

Wendy ran on down the stairs, out the back door. It was no use trying to fight through the milling crowd in the barroom. Besides, the holdup men would be watching that exit. She raced around through the alley, out to the street.

Three figures were riding away in the darkness, headed south. Wendy raised the .38 and fired.

She thought one man jerked in the saddle, but could not be certain. They must already have spotted her in the light streaming out from the Golden Glow. Flame bit at the darkness and a veritable blast of lead hurtled out at her.

Instinctively, Wendy ducked behind the corner of the Golden Glow. The shots ceased. She thrust out her head again, emptied the .38 at the disappearing riders. This time she knew they were too far away for accurate shooting. She could only hope that a stray shot had found its mark.

Cautious heads were poked out of the Golden Glow. In a moment, the crowd would be pouring forth. Wendy did not want to be caught there to answer questions. But she had spotted something gleaming in the dusty street as the holdups rode away. She ran out and picked it up, then ducked back into the alley. It was only a horseshoe, lost from one of the mounts of the departing thieves, but it might help.

Ike Townsend and Luke Henry came out of the Golden Glow, Winchesters in their hands. They took a look down the street, turned and headed into the far alley. They were going to get mounts from the stables back there. A dozen men were out in the streets by now.

REMEMBERING her mother's orders, Wendy decided she would not try to join the posse. There would be plenty of volunteers for that. But the shoe in her hand gave her a hunch. It should be possible to backtrack the trail of a horse with a loose shoe. Probably it would do no good, but she would see if she could find out just where these men had come from.

Going back from the hitchrack where the outlaws' mounts had stood briefly, the trail led up the street to the north, in the opposite direction to that which the men had taken in getting away. It was a fresh trail, fairly easy to follow. Two or three men passed Wendy, running toward the Golden Glow, and one of them she recognized as Lem Hanson, the sheriff. Wendy tried to keep as inconspicuous as possible. It was not difficult, since for the most part the citizens of Singing Woman, having heard shooting, kept strictly indoors. A few heads peered from Spike Dean's Wagon Wheel, but no one came out of there.

Wendy followed the trail for fifty yards or more up the street, past the bank and the sheriff's office and the hardware store.

Here, to her surprise, it turned sharply to the right. She paused, a little puzzled. The trail seemed to issue from a narrow alley beside the hardware store. What had the outlaws been doing back there?

As she hesitated, she heard hoofbeats just behind her, whirled. The hoofbeats stopped. She looked up at a rider atop a sorrel horse, a rider who wore a black sombrero, the crown peaked in the southern style.

Wendy reached for the .38 and remembered then that she had not reloaded it. The rider was dismounting. He swept off his sombrero, and she recognized him then as the dark-haired young Texan whom she

had so ingloriously driven from the Golden Glow earlier that day. Now there was a half-smile on his face.

"Miss Holloway," he said, "my name's Lee Vickery."

"I don't doubt it," answered Wendy.

He did not seem perturbed by her sharp answer. "I been nosin' around a mite since this afternoon," he said. "Reckon I owe you and your ma some apologies. Seems like maybe I acted kind of hasty."

Wendy was a little nonplussed, even a little suspicious. She did not know quite what to say.

"Maybe you did," she answered at last. "But right now—"

"Anyhow," he said, "you sure gave me my comeuppance. Never did see a gal before that could handle a mop that fast."

"Thanks," said Wendy. She smiled faintly. "I'm used to it. You see, people that run joints like ours have trouble every day."

"Now Miss," said Lee Vickery hastily, "I didn't mean that at all. Told you I was sorry. I was trying to smooth things over for the boys. Didn't know about Ma Holloway and—you."

"That's all right," Wendy assured him. She still had half her mind upon that trail. "I accept your apologies. Is that all you had to say, Mr. Vickery?"

"Why—yes," he said. "Heard some shootin' just as I was headin' out of town. I—can I help you, Miss Holloway?"

"No thanks," she answered. "I'm all right. As for that shooting—it was just a bunch of Texans holding up the Golden Glow. Good night, Mr. Vickery."

With that, she turned and started up the alley, leaving him standing there. He shook his head sadly, put on his sombrero, shook his head again. Then he turned away and climbed into his saddle.

WENDY had not really meant to be so sharp with the Texan. His apologies seemed sincere enough. The fact was that if things had been more normal she would have liked to stand and talk with him. Lee Vickery, when he was not on the prod as he had been that afternoon, had a way about him that you could not help liking, and his lean and sunbrowned face was not hard to look at.

But it was no time to think of matters of that sort now. For one thing, Wendy wanted to find out where the trail of the loose-shod horse had come from. That wasn't all. She had noticed that one of the holdups was tall and slender and wore a black sombrero; that, with the mask off, just fitted Lee Vickery. Besides, those bandits had given the impression that they were Texas cowpunchers on the prod, because of some real or fancied injury. And where had Lee Vickery come from so suddenly, right after the shooting?

Maybe that wasn't the answer. She hoped not. Just the same, this did not seem the time to let Lee Vickery help her. Or delay her.

Halfway up the alley, she paused, emptied the spent shells from her .38. As she took the loaded gun from her mother's dresser, she had also grabbed for a handful of loose cartridges, thrust them into the pocket of her blouse. The handful proved now, to her

disappointment, to be only three. But three was better than none.

It was dark here in the alley. She found a stick of splintery pine, lit it with a match. With this for a torch, she was able to pick up the trail again.

It led her to the maze of sheds, outbuildings and stables that cluttered the space behind the false-fronted buildings of Main Street. Then it veered to the left, toward the railroad and the shipping pens. It looked like they were Texas cowpunchers on the prod, all right. Wendy felt a little saddened by the knowledge.

But to her surprise, the trail did not continue on to the shipping pens. After a few yards out here in the comparatively open ground at the edge of town, it swung right again. It looked as if these men had ridden in from no particular place, merely from the open range to the north and east of town. There was nothing ahead that Wendy could see save a water tower, looming out of the darkness ten or fifteen rods down the railroad tracks from the last of the shipping pens.

HER TORCH burned so low that it scorched her fingers and she had to drop it. The darkness was much thicker here beyond the lights of the town. She looked for some moments for another piece of wood for a torch, found nothing.

She supposed it did not really matter, after all. Her hunch had been wrong. Back-trailing the holdups was going to prove nothing. Lem Hanson had a better chance, pursuing them directly.

Still, Wendy thought, it would do no harm to walk on toward the water tower. Since that was the direction they had ridden from, it was barely possible they had paused there briefly, hiding in its shadows for a last pause before they rode on into town. If they had, there was always the chance, unlikely as it was, that they might unintentionally have left behind some faint indication of their identity.

She walked on. Once she lit a match, looked at the ground again. There was still the mark of the horse with the loose shoe. It was surprising that the rider had not noticed it.

As she came closer to the water tower, she noticed something odd about it. Something hung from a crossbeam, swaying a little in the breeze. It did not seem to belong there.

Wendy stopped short, barely suppressed a scream. No, it did not belong there. The thing that hung from the crossbeam was the body of a man.

It took all the courage she possessed to walk forward those few remaining steps to the water tower. She looked furtively around her, at last lit another match. Then Wendy did scream.

The man hanging there was Dr. Lathrop.

Somehow, Wendy managed to shinny up the corner post of the tower, work her way out to the crossbeam. She had no knife, but she had picked up a sharp-edged stone from the ground. She sawed desperately at the rope until it gave.

She slid to the ground, got the rope free from around the doctor's neck. She listened at his chest for a heartbeat, could hear none. Her cheek touched a piece of paper fastened to his coat. She lit a match and looked at it. Crudely lettered on the paper were these words:

THIS WAS A VIGILANTE

FOR THE NEXT fifteen minutes, Wendy tried everything she knew to bring life back to Doc Lathrop. She had heard that artificial respiration sometimes helped, and she turned him on his back and went to work. It did no good. She saw then that his head lolled sidewise in a curious position. His neck was broken, and nothing she might do could save him.

Wendy sat down on the ground and cried. She was remembering all the things he had done for her when she was a child. She was remembering how, just a few hours back, he had labored so hard to produce music from his slide trombone to welcome her home.

After a bit she got up. Dr. Lathrop had been murdered. Tears and all her efforts could not bring him back to life, but her efforts could help to bring the men who had killed him to justice.

It was all beginning to fit into some

faint semblance of a pattern, although it still did not make sense. The men who had robbed the Golden Glow must have been the men who killed Doc Lathrop. Their trail proved that much. But this was no job done by drunken cowpunchers on the prod. This had been done for a reason. This was an open declaration of war by the lawless elements of the community, and Wendy could see now why her mother had not wanted her to come back to Singing Woman at this time, why she had been so perturbed at Doc Lathrop's disappearance.

By the same token, the robbing of the Golden Glow must have been part of the same plan. Trying to blame it on Texans had only been a means of confusing the issue, hoping to make trouble between Ma Holloway and such men as Lee Vickery. They had not figured that the two crimes would be tied together.

But finding out this much, Wendy realized, was not enough. It still did not tell her who the real crooks in Singing Woman were. They were powerful, or they would not have dared to make this bold move.

Clumsily, hesitantly, Wendy searched through the doctor's pockets. The search yielded nothing. Then, remembering her reason for coming this far, she began to search the ground about the water tower.

She found many hoofmarks, a few matches, here and there a cigarette butt. The killers had tarried long enough to make certain that Doc Lathrop was dead.

Then her eyes, long since accustomed to the darkness, spotted something else. It looked like a piece of paper, almost hidden by one of the uprights that supported the water tank. She bent and picked it up.

Probably it had been dropped unconsciously by someone reaching for a cigarette. It looked like a bill of sale, for horses or cattle, but in the darkness she could not quite make out the scrawled handwriting nor the names upon it. She reached in her pocket and found a last match.

"DROP IT!" a man's voice behind her said. "And don't turn around or I'll plug you."

Wendy froze. She tried to get a fleeting glance at the paper in her hand, but the match sputtered and went out. Afterward, she was not even sure that she had not dropped it at the sound of the voice.

"You've been snoopin' around here," the voice said, "as long as it's healthy for you. Maybe longer. It's time you got movin'."

"I'll go," Wendy said.

"Not without droppin' that paper you won't. And not till you've heard some good advice."

"I—just found it lying there," Wendy said.

"I know. Looks like you found some other things, or you wouldn't have got this far. Lady, it ain't healthy to find out too many things in this town."

"Do you expect," she said defiantly, "that I'll just stand around when a fine man has been murdered?"

"I expect you'll keep your nose out of what happens, if you want to live. That gent there couldn't. That's why he's dead. The same goes for you and your mother. You march back home and tell Ma Holloway she's gotten too danged bossy. Tell her to stick to the Golden Glow."

"I'll tell her," Wendy answered. "I'll tell her there's a gang of cold-blooded murderers running loose, and if we don't stop them nobody else will."

"Get!" the man snapped angrily. "Drop that paper and get movin'! I won't stop at killin' a woman."

Wendy dropped the paper, took a slow step forward. As she did so, her hands, which had been raised, came casually down. It was only a little farther to the .38 tucked inside the waistband of her skirt. She walked on a few more steps, until she thought she was hidden by the darkness.

Then she grabbed for the gun and whirled.

She had not heard the man's footsteps. She had thought that he was standing there, waiting for her to go. But as she whirled, a dark shape loomed up, not three feet away, an arm upraised.

She saw the blow coming and tried to duck. She fired once blindly. Then a pistol barrel slammed down squarely against the side of her head.

(To be continued in the next issue)

Big League Bonanza

By William Freeman Hough

TO BEGIN with, no guy should wear a derby hat, especially in Lope, Texas. A derby hat is an affront to one of the best traditions of the West. Personally, I hate 'em. So I am a bit annoyed that afternoon when one of the three characters to get off the local has a grey derby perched on the top of his noggin.

This gent I speak of is dressed like a million bucks. Everything about him hollers to high heaven of money. He is built like a salt barrel from the hips up, has a florid face and fourteen chins. But it is the derby that gets me down.

I am standing near the express car where a crate of oranges has just been unloaded, so it is most natural that my hand wanders into that crate and closes around a hunk of fruit. That orange fits my hand just right. Like a baseball, almost. Yonder, fifty feet away, is a grey derby which looms up like an old buzzard's nest on a red crag. I wind up and let fly. It is a perfect strike. The grey derby goes sailing off like it has suddenly sprouted wings.

For a minute or so I feel better. The big guy is standing there with one hand feeling of his bald head which shines out like a clean platter in our Texas spring sun. Then of a sudden, I don't feel so good. A girl has rushed across the cinder platform and thrown her arms about the gent's neck and she is kissing him real fervent. Something inside me begins to boil.

I didn't even know that Linda Dorsett was in town, and here she is, the light of my life, kissing a total stranger and kicking up her heels with joy. It is sickening. I watch while the big guy gives her a fond squeeze and then points at me. Linda looks. She listens while he explains what has happened and arranges the grey derby on his dome. One of his friends, a slim guy, has fetched it back to him. Then Linda heads

for me, walking like a young porcupine on the prod. Automatically I reach for another orange, my intentions toward the restored derby all bad. But Lindy is in between us.

"You big oaf!" she cries, stopping before me and putting balled fists on her lips. "Won't you ever grow up? Are you going to play kid tricks all your life?"

"It's a derby," I inform her. "A grey derby, which is a disgrace to the sovereign state of Texas. And why, may I ask, did you kiss that hunk of lard?"

"Because he is my very own uncle!" she storms.

"Your—uncle? You mean that—that—Heck, I didn't know."

"You don't know from nothing," she snaps. "And if you had the sense the Lord gave a goat, you'd think twice before you start throwing things at strangers. You act

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ON THE mound Denny could pitch a sizzling fireball or a soft, snaky blooper, so he shouldn't have ended up in left field with one foot in a bucket when the scouts came around

like some silly little kid out for recess."

"Now look, honey," I plead.

"Don't you honey me, Denny Adair. Until you get some sense in your head I never want to see you again."

That riles me. Lindy has been my honey for several months, and we've been making certain plans. Now a fat uncle comes along and ruins it all. Just because I blast a derby hat off his head.

"Now look," I say. "You ought to thank me for removing a hat from your relative, a hat that is a disgrace to our community."

"Thank you?" she shrills. "I despise you for it. Uncle George can wear what he likes."

"Because he's got a lot of money, huh?"

"Why, you big oaf!" she pants.

"You said that once," I remind her. "Don't you know any new names to call me?"

"I'll never call you anything, ever again, but what I'll be thinking about you would scorch a saddle blanket." She whirls about and marches back to the three strangers who have picked up their luggage. She walks as though her legs are sticks, which they ain't, I can assure you.

And thus we parted, as the saying goes, and not the best of friends as you can see. I watch the party climb into the Cross D station wagon and go whirling up the street and out of town. Which leaves me a little sore in the mind, feeling that this day has not been all that it should be.

Three beers and four confusions later, I fork my horse and head for home. I say home with a tongue in my cheek, for my little spread north of Lope lacks all the attributes of what is commonly called a home. I've got one section of land with not enough grass on it to feed my ninety head of scrawny beeves. There is a two-room shack on the place with cracks in it wide enough to throw a hat through, and I don't mean anything dinky as a derby. There is an old artesian well back of the house which is so foul-smelling that a skunk wouldn't come within a mile of it. I have capped the pipe because what water came out of it was a yellowish-black and unfit for consumption by man or beast. So I get my water from Scatter Creek, three miles beyond my section line.

All right, so I am nuts for staying on the place. But a guy's got some pride, ain't he? He's got to make a start somewhere or else be an ordinary ranch hand all his life. I would have been sunk long since if it wasn't for the extra work I get on the Cross D and the games of ball I pitch on Sunday for the Lope Coyotes. Yeah, I can pitch a game of ball. I got a good wing and plenty of natural stuff. Ten bucks a game during the baseball season is just about the difference between getting by and folding up. Linda always encouraged me to hang on too, but now that is gone.

Well, I am lower that a gopher's belly when I arrive at the little shack. I should drive my ninety beeves over to Scatter Creek for water but I am no longer enthused by anything about the place. I unfork and sit down in the doorway to stare across my flat section of land. Inside is a smell of old grease, on account I generally fry everything I eat. Outside is the horrible odor of that old artesian well. The pipe is rusting and cracking and the stuff is oozing out to soil what otherwise would of been good Texas air. I am very unhappy about things, believe me. But I still hate derby hats.

I AM wondering why I didn't stay in town and shoot a few games of pool when I see a cloud of dust off to the west. It don't take me long to figure out that it is made by the Cross D station wagon, and I suspicion that Sam Dorsett is coming over to shoot it out with me on account of what I'd done to his brother's grey derby. Linda's dad hasn't been so keen about me ever since she and me started making plans for the future. I am not invited over to the Cross D so often of late, either for work or pleasure.

But Sam ain't driving the car today. Linda is behind the wheel, and with her is the slim guy that got off the train with her uncle. She brakes down, gets out and comes to where I'm standing in the door of the shack. The slim gent sits there looking about, his nose wrinkled as he catches the stink from the old well.

"I thought you'd sworn off speaking to me," I greets her as she stops before me. She is as pretty as a picture and graceful as a gazelle. I make no bones over the fact that I am crazy about her.

Her lips have a cute little quirk to them as she says, "I'm sorry I blew up at the depot, Denny. I guess it was the excitement of seeing Uncle George again. Will you forgive me?"

"Shucks, I love you, honey. But I'm not making any pleas because I blasted the derby hat."

"That's what I came over about, Denny. Uncle George is much interested in your throwing skill. He scolded me for getting mad with you. He says that any man who can throw like that has possibilities, and when I told him you pitched ball for the Lope Coyotes he declared he wanted to have a talk with you. You see, Denny, Uncle George owns the Texas Torpedo baseball club."

"You don't say!" I exclaim.

"Yes, he does. And he's brought his manager and secretary with him. They are looking about for a new place to set up a spring training camp."

"The Torpedoes are in training now, Linda."

"I know, but Uncle George isn't satisfied with the camp. He wants to make a change by next year. Of course, he's always looking for good players and I told him you were the very best."

"You shouldn't be so modest, honey," I grin.

"So I've come here to ask you to see Uncle George tomorrow. He would have come with us now only he's tired from the train ride. Will you come, Denny?"

I draw her into the doorway and put my arms around her. The slim guy has got out of the car and is walking around back of the shack, but just in case he's peeking I take her inside to give her a real kiss.

"I'll be over in the morning," I say. "But tell him not to be wearing that derby bonnet. The cockeyed thing will upset me."

She pulls my ear down to her lips. "Maybe this will be the start of something good for us, Denny," she whispers. "Do your best."

Well, it was a gorgeous sunset that evening. Everything had turned rosy for me again. Before turning in, I threw a couple dozen rocks at the chimney just to loosen up my arm, and next morning the old stove smoked because the chimney was so dented in.

AFTER a hasty breakfast I saddles up and rides the four miles to the Cross D. I find the whole family seated on the broad porch awaiting my arrival. I meet George Dorsett who seems jolly and good-natured. I reckon a fat man has to be that way because he can't run or fight. Then there was Henry Slapp, the slim

secretary and Joe Krug, the manager of the Torpedoes, who is very hard-boiled looking and plenty skeptical as he looks me over. I suppose a manager of a Texas League team has to be that way.

After some conversation in which I answer a lot of questions, the Krug gent fetches out a catcher's mitt and a baseball and asks me to throw him a few. We step out before the porch, and I slam some straight, hard ones at him. I smoke 'em in for a little and he nods.

"Those are all right, kid," he says, "but you'll never get by with just a straight hard one. Show me some stuff."

I put a fade on the next one, and it jumped out of his mitt. He slams it back to me and I hand him a screwball that was a dinger. He grunts and looks at George Dorsett. I give him a downer the next time, and he's plumb handcuffed trying to handle it.

"That's enough," he raps out and walks back to the porch.

Linda is waiting anxiously as the manager sits down and examines his hand which has turned beet-red. There is a little silence and then Krug says to Dorsett, "Better sign him up, George."

"Oh, good!" cries Linda. She turns to her uncle. "You will, won't you?"

"If Joe says he's good enough."

"Got a lot of natural stuff," grunts the manager.

"Okay," says Dorsett. "I'll have Henry draw up a contract. How about two hundred a month to start off with, Adair?"

"Now, wait a minute," I says.

Dorsett waves a fat hand. "Oh, make it three hundred, then."

"It's not the money part of it," I says. "You haven't seen me pitch against a batter."

"But I have!" cries Linda. "He's just dandy, Uncle George. He makes 'em strike out an awful lot."

"Son," says her uncle to me, "we know a natural born pitcher when we see one. That's our business."

"Just the same, I'd rather you'd see me pitch in a regular game."

"Can't you take their word for it, Denny?" asks Linda's father. "Or maybe you're not sure you want to play ball with the Texas Torpedoes."

"Of course he does!" says Linda.

"Maybe he's thinking about his ranch," puts in Henry Slapp.

"That shouldn't bother him," says Sam Dorsett. "I'll look after his cattle, or I'll even buy the herd from him. That would be his easy way to get out from under a bad situation."

"When it comes to the ranch," says Slapp, "I've looked the land over a little, and I find that it is level and would make a good ball field."

"Now, wait a minute!" I says again.

"We could build living quarters for the squad over there?" asks George Dorsett, ignoring me entirely.

"Oh, sure," says Slapp. "The only trouble is there's no water."

"We could dig a well, though?"

"Naturally."

"Hey, I got a well there," I yell at them.

"That artesian thing?" says Slapp lifting his eyebrows. "That is terrible. Smells like a mixture of sulphur and kerosene."

"That'd be great stuff for the boys to bathe in," speaks up Joe Krugg. "Boil out their muscles. Looks like a natural setup to me."

"I'll write a check for the place," says George Dorsett.

"Hey!" I yodel. "Remember me? I own the place. I'm Denny Adair. What's all the stampede about?"

"Oh!" says the baseball magnet. "Well, excuse us, Denny. We're so used to doing business the quick way. Was there something else you had in mind?"

"Yeah, a little time. I want to think."

"But Denny," pleads Linda, "here is everything just as you wanted it."

"I ain't so sure, Linda. It's coming too fast to suit me."

Her father waves a hand. "Why don't you two take a little ride together and talk it over? Linda, you make him see what a fine chance he's getting."

SO I saddle a horse for her, and we lope off across the range. We keep going until we reach the upper end of Scatter Creek, where we dismount under

some cottonwoods. Here Linda takes my hand and looks into my face. "I can't understand why you hesitate, Denny," she says.

"Right at this minute I can't give you a good reason, Linda, except, like I said, it's coming too fast."

"Opportunity knocks but once, Denny."

"Well, this one has knocked me into a loop. I got to think it over."

She drops my hand and turns away. "I guess I just don't understand you," she murmurs. "Here's the chance of a lifetime, and you hesitate. Don't you see what it would mean to us?"

"That's why I'm cautious, honey. I want to be sure it would be the best for us."

"But think of three hundred dollars a month! And that's just the start. You could go on to the big leagues, make thousands a year, maybe."

"Maybe! There's a lot of maybes in this deal. Maybe I wouldn't make good. Maybe I wouldn't like professional baseball. Maybe I'd rather be a rancher all my life, even a small one."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" she cries and gets on her horse. "I guess there's just no use talking to you about it."

"Well, I'm going to think it over before I sign away my ranch and join the Club," I say, bowing my neck. "Of course I could be wrong, but it seems to me that things don't happen to a guy this fast and end up for his own good."

"But you might think of me," she says, tilting her chin.

"You bet I'm thinking of you."

"I wonder!" She wheels the bronc around and digs her spurs.

So I let her go back alone. I'm full of doubt and worry as I head for home. Sure, it's the chance of a lifetime, but what is that thing that keeps telling me to go slow? A hunch? I don't know, but I got it just the same. Maybe it'll come to me after I've had a chance to stretch out on my old bunk and think. I've done a lot of thinking in that bunk, just lying there and staring up through the cracks in the roof. I'll lie there and take this thing apart, step by step. I'll reason that George Dorsett ain't in business for his health. If he wants me to pitch for him I must be worth it. If he wants to buy my section of land for a training setup, it means something good for him. What's in it for me—a baseball career? Money? Nothing bad for me that I can see. So why not latch onto it? And yet that prod keeps telling me to hold off.

I don't see any of those people for three days, then Henry Slapp drives up in the Cross D station wagon. He wrinkles his nose at the stink about the place and says, "Adair, we've arranged an exhibition game of ball between the Lope Coyotes and the Canyon Cats. It's early for your little league to get started, but we've told the boys that Dorsett is looking for talent, and they fell all over themselves at the chance. You'll pitch for the Coyotes."

"Okay," I say. "Next Sunday, I suppose."

"Yes. In town. Do your best, Adair." He starts back to the car but stops. "Have you thought any more about selling this place to us?"

"I've thought about it. Ain't made up my mind yet."

The slim guy grins. "You're as cautious as a Vermont farmer, lad. I thought you Texans were always ready to strike up a deal, especially one that's all to your good."

"Well, Mr. Slapp, a Vermont farmer might not get bit, of course, but a Texan can hear a snake buzz sooner that most."

"I don't get it," he says with a scowl.

"I don't either," I tells him. "And that's just what bothers me."

THE NEXT Sunday Lope, Texas, is plenty excited. The word has got around that a big shot in baseball is here to watch some players in our little league and maybe some of the local boys will make good with him. They're even laying a few bets that me, Denny Adair, will be one of those boys to get signed. I don't say anything one way or another. I just go out to the sand lot and get into my dirty old ball uniform.

Since we're the home team for this exhibition game, the Coyotes take the field first. I go out to the mound and toss a few into my catcher just to loosen up my arm. Back of the plate, seated in the old grand

stand, is all the Dorsett tribe, Henry Slapp and Joe Krug. I notice that George Dorsett is not wearing that grey derby. I gather that he don't want a baseball coming in high to pick it off, being aware of my feelings concerning derbys.

Well, I start right off as though in mid-season form. I fan the first two hitters and make the third flub an easy grounder to the third baseman. We don't get any hits in our half of the inning either; the other pitcher is bearing down with all he's got. Next time I'm on the mound I use something beside the hard, fast one, and mow 'em down one-two-three. Joe Krug nods his head, and Linda claps her little hands.

That's the way it goes for six innings. I am hotter than an Irishman's clay pipe that day. And then, in the seventh, it comes to me. All of a sudden. Just like that, out of the clear, Texas sky, I know why they want to sign me up for the Texas Torpedoes. They'll even buy my old ranch in the bargain. Why? Just to get me away from Linda!

It's a frame up! Sam Dorsett has called his rich brother in to save the day for him. Sam doesn't want his only daughter marrying a two-bit rancher like Denny Adair. Sure I can pitch ball, but maybe it don't make any difference if I ain't good enough for the Texas Torpedoes. They'll sign me up anyway and farm me out to some Class Z Club. I'll be tied up, kept away from Lope. They'll hound me around so that I can't possibly make good, and Linda will get disgusted. And I won't even have my ranch to come back to.

All these things are racing through my head as I take the mound for the seventh inning. And can I see red! I am sore at myself for not seeing it all sooner. The first ball I pitch goes clean over my catcher's head. The next goes into the ground at the batter's feet, and he did a war dance out of the way. I burn the next one wide and the crowd begins to yell. The catcher comes out to me.

"What's the matter, Denny?" he asks. "Your arm gone sore?"

"I'm sore all over!" I yaps. "Get back to the plate."

I walk five batters in a row and the manager of the Coyotes beckons me in off the mound. As I pass the stands I can see Dorsett talking to Joe Krug. Linda has her face in her hands and won't look at me. All right, if I'm going to lose her I'll do it my way. I go under the seats and change into my other clothes.

I am surprised to find her waiting for me as I pass out the park gate. She grabs my arm and says, "Denny, what on earth happened to you? I've never seen you pitch like that! Why, you just threw the ball away. What made you do it?"

"So you really want to know! You ain't guessed this whole rotten scheme!"

"Why—why, what do you mean, Denny?"

"Look, Linda. If I hadn't lost my control your uncle would have insisted that I sign up."

"Why, naturally. It was you who wanted to show him by pitching in a regular game."

"Yeah, but I didn't know then what was behind this deal. It just came to me as I started the seventh inning."

"What came to you, Denny? Stop talking in riddles."

"Ha! Then listen, sweet lady. It was just a scheme to get me out of the country. Your Dad doesn't like me any more. Anyhow, he don't want me for a son-in-law."

"But I don't see what—"

"So he calls in rich Uncle George. I was to be framed into signing up with the Texas Torpedoes, whether I could make good or not. Anything to get me away from you, Linda. Get it?"

"No! Oh, no, it couldn't be that."

"Don't kid yourself, girl."

"Then you threw wild just so they couldn't sign you up?"

"I threw wild because I was so damned mad about it. I don't like to lose a ball game any more than the next guy, but there is a limit."

"And you really think that's what they were planning?" She draws back and looks me over sort of cool.

"What else?" I snap.

"And even if it were so, Denny, what about me? Didn't you give me any credit for loyalty to you? Don't you think that I

would have stuck by you even though you were framed? Even though you didn't make good playing baseball?"

"How could I be sure of that, Linda? You were so dead set on me signing up with Uncle George. The other day you were impatient with me for even hesitating. Judging from that, I'd have been a dead duck with you if I had failed. And believe me, they'd see that I failed."

"All right, Denny, if that's the way you feel about it. If you have no more faith in me than that, it's better that we learn it now."

I STAND there, flubbing around, trying to think of something to say so she'd know that it wasn't a lack of faith in her. Before I can collect the words she has turned and walked away. The world is plenty dark for me at the moment.

I don't linger in town—what's the good of trying to explain such a thing to all your friends. I head out for the two-bit spread which I am now inclined to name Denny's Den of Despair. When I get there I barn my horse and go into the house to sit down and think, only there's no profit in that now. I don't even want to eat anything. I just sit there staring out the door, watching the sun go down. It is not a gorgeous sunset by any means.

I don't know how long I've been asleep that night before I am wakened by somebody calling my name. It sounds like Linda's voice and for a minute I think that I have been dreaming that she came back to me. I listen hard, hoping it is not a dream.

"Denny! Denny, wake up and dress."

"Is that you, Linda?" I husk.

"Yes. Please hurry. I've something to tell you."

Good glory! I'm out of the bunk and dressed in less than a minute. Linda is modestly standing outside the door. Her horse is making moon shadows at the corner of the shack. I put my hands on her shoulders and make her look up at me.

"Denny," she whispers, "I'm mortally ashamed of it all."

"Forget it honey. We were both a little sore."

"It's not that, Denny. I'm ashamed of what they planned to do. It wasn't right, not decent."

"So long as we found out in time, what's the harm?"

"But you don't understand," she cries. "It wasn't so much to get you and me separated, although I think that was part of it— Dad's idea, at least."

"Then what?"

"They were scheming to get this ranch. They are still talking about it."

"For a baseball training camp? Shucks, dearie, there are hundreds of better places than this."

"But they still are scheming to get it, Denny. I heard Uncle George and Henry Slapp talking about it tonight. They were in a bedroom next to mine and I couldn't help but hear what they said. They want this place badly for some reason."

I shake my head. "I can't imagine why," I tell her. "It's nothing but a burned-out section of land."

"Well, they're coming over, tonight sometime. I heard 'em say so. They want to check something just to be sure, and they don't want you to see them. That's why I slipped out and rode over here."

"And I was hoping you'd come over just to see me," I grieves.

She pulls my head down and kisses me. "There! Does that mean anything?"

"Oh, brother!"

I lead her horse around to my alleged barn and then come back to her. We go into the shack and sit down where we can watch through the open door. I don't know just what I'm going to do when those guys do arrive. I'll just have to wait and see what develops.

Linda sits close to me, holding my hand, and her fingers tighten up at the slightest sound outside. An hour goes by, then another. No visitors. I ask Linda if she's sure they planned to come over tonight and she says that's what they said they'd do. So we keep on waiting.

The moon is so far west that it no longer shines through the door when I hear something out back that is not just a natural night sound. It's something like a boot striking a rock. Then silence. I litt Linda up and we creep out the door and around

the northwest corner of the shack. So help me if there ain't three men there by the old artesian well. They are all bent down so I can't see their faces, but I sure can recognize George Dorsett's derby hat. They are mucking around in the stuff leaking from the pipe of the well.

"For heaven's sake!" whispers Linda. "I should think they'd stay away from that place."

We watch for a minute. Henry Slapp seems to be putting something in a bottle or can. He is nodding his head very energetically and whispering something to the big gent.

"What on earth does it mean?" says Linda in my ear.

I don't answer her. Something is beginning to dawn on my dumb brain. It is something that leaves me breathless with hope. The more I think of it the more I feel my hackles begin to rise. Automatically I stoop down and gather up a rock that just fits my hand. I slant a glance at Dorsett's grey derby and let fly.

MAYBE it's because I'm really excited and sore now. Anyhow, my hard straight one goes in too low and picks off the rusted cap I'd put over the well pipe a year back. And the minute that cap comes off something happens. That old artesian well sort of coughs to clear its throat, then it spits out a gob of black muck, snorts some gas and then settles down to rolling out a thick, black stream.

I don't remember how I got over to the well. The next thing I know I've got George Dorsett face down in the muck and sitting on his head, derby hat and all. While he is having a convulsion trying to get up, Henry Slapp aims a kick at me. I grab his foot and up end him. Down he comes in the mess, bleating like stuck sheep. Then Joe Krug closes in on me.

It's quite a fight, believe me. Krug is big and tough. He knocks me flat a couple of times before I can slam a fist into his middle. That doubles him over, and I let him have a greasy knee right under the chin. He makes a sound like stuck brakes and flops over on his back. By that time dear Uncle George has hoisted his hulk up, and he is waving his arms about and yelling for help. His head is jammed up in the derby so far that Henry Slapp has to rip the crown off so the mogul can see.

"Listen, Adair," he bleats. "This is all a mistake. We just wanted to make sure before we made you a legitimate offer."

"Tell that to Sweeney!" I bark. "If you guessed there was oil in this old well, why didn't you come to me like a man about it? No, you tried to beat me out of it with a lot of baseball hokum."

"Honest, Denny, we didn't know about the oil until Henry came over here the other day. He knows oil. He smelled it. We just couldn't be sure that the bottom of the pipe had actually penetrated the upper strata of an oil basin."

"That's still no excuse. Now get the hell out of here, all of you!"

"Wait a minute, old man. Let me buy the place. I'll write you a check for it right now." He puts a dripping hand into a pocket and fumbles around. The big guy is a sight, covered with oil and muck.

"I said get out!" I yelps at him.

"That's right, Denny," chimes in Linda coming up. "Don't you sell to him. We can find a way to finance this oil well without any help from these—these rogues. And, Mr. Dorsett, you can tell my father that I don't like his style of doing things. You can tell him that I won't be home tonight. You tell him that Denny and me are going to Lope in the morning to be married."

We stand there side by side and watch the three guys stumble off to where they have left the Cross D station wagon. It doesn't make any difference to Linda that I'm covered with oil muck and stink to high heaven. Around our feet is flowing black gold, which makes the future look very bright indeed. In fact, I can already vision ten or twelve oil derricks rising on my section, and a swell new house in town. And maybe a Denny, Jr., who I will surely teach how to pitch. Anyhow he'll learn to throw straight enough to blast any derbys that ever come around.

Rope for a Rustler

By Robert Moore Williams

WHAT HAD started as a rustling raid on Mexican cattle south of the Rio Grande had ended in a running fight with Captain Martin and his men from the Cattlemen's Association, who had been lying in ambush above the river crossing.

Curly Long and Harley Kerr stopped their horses on top of a little rise and looked back along the trail for signs of pursuit. Curly Long made certain the end of the bandanna handkerchief was still stuffed in the hole in his shoulder.

The afternoon sun slanted across a vast expanse of rolling plain dotted with mesquite trees and clumps of sagebrush.

"We've got away from 'em," Kerr said.

Curly Long did not reply. Before his eyes the plain was swaying with a gentle rocking motion. Waves were moving across the solid earth like waves across a stormy sea. He was staring glassy-eyed at them when he fell out of the saddle.

TOO LATE, Curly Long realized that the owlhoot trail didn't lead where he wanted most to go. . . .

The shock of falling partly cleared his mind. "Help me back on my horse, Harley," he whispered.

"If you're that near gone, I can't be burdened with you," he heard Kerr answer. "Not with Martin on my trail."

He saw Kerr spur his horse, heard the tired animal trot off. The sound of hoofbeats died away to the north.

Curly Long did not know how long it took him to build up enough strength to rise to his feet, stumble to his horse, and pull himself into the saddle. Under other circumstances, he might not have made it, but the knowledge that Captain Martin was somewhere behind gave him strength he did not otherwise possess.

Under the leadership of Captain Martin, ex of the Texas Rangers, the ranchers had grouped into an association and were clearing the rustlers out of west Texas, with ropes. Likely as not a rustler caught in the act didn't get the formality of a trial. "I *know* I've cured a man of rustling when I've hung him," Captain Martin had said.

Kerr had claimed that Captain Martin was far to the east, in the Big Bend country, when he'd talked Curly into going with him after Mexican cattle. "And the cows down there hardly belong to anybody," Kerr had said. "Them greasers have got more cattle than they can count, Curly. It ain't really stealing because nobody knows who owns the cows. And I got a buyer all ready. Come on with me, Curly, and we'll pick ourselves up a few pesos. And—" Kerr had calculatingly added "—you can go back to Missouri and see that girl you're always mooning about."

That had been the clincher. Curly Long had ridden south with Harley Kerr. Now Kerr was gone, and Curly, a bullet in him, was barely able to sit in the saddle. Pulling his horse out of the trail, he turned west, into country he did not know, hoping that if Captain Martin was still after them, he would follow Kerr north. Bent almost double in the saddle, he let his horse pick its own course, neither knowing nor caring where it went.

The horse stopped in front of a small ranch house snuggled under two immense cottonwood trees. Blue smoke spiraled upward from the kitchen chimney. Behind the house the sun was a huge red ball low in the west.

Looking at the house, Curly thought: "I'm home. I've rode home again. I went on a rustling raid so I'd have the money to go back for a visit, and now I'm back."

He was remembering another house that looked like this one, a house under a cottonwood tree, the house where Mary Roberts lived in Missouri. There ought to be a dog running around the house to bark at him.

Yap, yap, yap. The dog came out from under the kitchen.

Mary's house, Mary's dog?

"The fever's got me," he muttered. Mary Roberts was back in Missouri. He hadn't seen her or heard from her in two years, not since he came West to make the fortune he somehow hadn't made. This just looked like her house.

"Hello," he croaked. He waited for someone to come to the door. He had his speech all ready, how he had been shot by a bushwhacker and was lost.

The dog sniffed around the legs of his horse, making friendly motions with its tail and body. The front door opened. Mary Roberts looked out. Curly Long pulled off his hat. "Beg pardon, ma'am—"

She came running across the yard. He heard her voice. "Curly, Curly Long!" Her voice laughed up at him, laughed with the joy of seeing him. "Curly! How on earth did you ever find us? Dad and I have been living here for over a year and I had almost given up hope."

"Mary," he whispered, leaning down.

AT THE MOVEMENT, an agony of pain shot through his shoulder. Red lights like flashes from ambushed rifles exploded in his brain. The last thing he remembered as he hit the ground and passed out was the dog trying to lick his face and Mary bending over him. It was three days before the fever left him and he was fully conscious again. He awakened one morning to find himself in a small but very neat bedroom. There were gay curtains over the windows and in the corner a dressing table made of a packing box had been trimmed with brightly colored cloth. He knew then that he was in Mary's bedroom. The door opened and Mary entered.

"Hello," Curly said. "Mary! You're here, in Texas!"

She laughed. "Sure, Curly. We came

West over a year ago. A great many people are coming West these days and Daddy wanted to come too."

"Is your father here?"

"Yes. Do you want to speak to him? Dad!"

A step sounded in the doorway and Jack Roberts, tall and somber, entered the room. "Hello, Curly," he said.

"It was mighty nice of you to take me in. I sure appreciate—"

"Don't pay it any mind," Roberts answered. Unsmiling, he nodded again and left the room.

"Mary, has anyone been looking for me?" Curly questioned.

"Did you think someone might be looking for you?"

"Well, some of my friends—they might have come."

She shook her head. "None of your friends have been here, Curly. I guess they haven't found you yet."

Crack! A rifle exploded outside.

Curly Long almost jumped out of bed. The memory of rifles exploding from ambush was vivid in his mind. "Who was that?"

The girl's brown face was whitening. "Just one of the ranch hands shooting at a tin can," she answered. "They—they're a great bunch for target practice. No, you mustn't get out of bed. You're weak yet. Tomorrow you can get up."

Under the gentle but firm pressure of her hands, he allowed himself to be pushed back into bed. She fluffed up the pillows for him, smoothed the sheets.

"There was a bullet in me," he said.

"I know. It's out."

He sighed with relief. With the bullet out and the fever gone, it wouldn't be long until he was well. "Thanks for going for the doctor for me," he said.

"There's no doctor within forty miles," she answered.

He stared at her. "Then I guess your dad dug that bullet out."

"No, I did," she answered. "Would you like some broth?"

"You! Mary, that was no job for a woman!"

She laughed at him. "If men can get bullets in them, women can dig them out. Don't look so shocked, Curly. There wasn't anything to it, really."

Crack! The rifle exploded again.

"I'll get you some broth," she said. She hastened from the room and closed the door. Dimly Curly could hear her arguing with her father. "Those rifle shots are scaring him to death."

"Well, all right," he heard her father's grumbling reply. "I'll tell them to stop."

THE NEXT morning Curly Long walked out on the side porch under his own steam. Youth and a life spent in the open had given him marvelous recuperative powers. He was even able to carry out a rocking chair.

Sweet peas growing on strings made a canopy of green leaves in front of the porch. It was a cool and pleasant spot. Curly rocked in the chair and rolled himself cigarettes and scratched the ears of Mary's dog and listened to Mary rattle pots and pans in the kitchen. She was making cookies. He could smell their delicious fragrance. Two hundred yards away he could see the bunkhouse and a cowboy, his hat pulled down over his eyes, sound asleep in a tilted-back chair. Beside the cowboy, a rifle was resting against the wall.

The door slammed, and Mary came out of the kitchen and across the porch. She was wearing a fluffy apron, and she had a dab of flour on her chin. The sun, slanting through the sweet pea vines, threw a pattern of shadows over her.

"By golly, you're pretty."

She smiled at him and a trace of color appeared on her cheeks.

"Mary!" She came closer, and Curly Long choked on the words he was about to say. "I'll be damned if I say it!" he croaked. "It's not fair."

"What are you talking about, Curly?"

"Nothing," Curly answered. "I was just talking."

An odor floated out from the kitchen. "The cookies are burning," she gasped, and was gone.

She left a very perturbed man on the side porch. Tell her you're a wanted man, Curly Long fiercely told himself. Tell her

Captain Martin put the bullet in you that she dug out. Then she can make up her own mind what she wants to do. If she wants to go to New Mexico with you after that, she can go with open eyes.

Would she go to New Mexico with him, where Captain Martin had no jurisdiction? He knew she would, he saw it on her face and in her eyes. All he had to do was ask her.

But be fair with her, Curly raged to himself. What if Captain Martin caught you before you got to New Mexico? You'd be hanging from a limb, and Mary would be a widow before she was even a bride. Maybe she wouldn't want to take a chance like that.

A horse clumped into the yard. "Could I get a drink of water here?" a voice called out.

Curly Long froze in his rocking chair. Not ten feet from him, but screened by the pea vines, Harley Kerr was sitting on his horse.

"Help yourself at the pump," Mary Roberts called from the kitchen door.

As Kerr dismounted, Curly rose from the chair and started toward the door.

"Hey!" he heard Kerr say. "Hey, you, on the porch. . . . Oh, it's you," Kerr said as Curly turned.

"Do you two know each other?" Mary Roberts asked.

"Slightly," Curly Long said.

"Sure, we know each other," Harley Kerr said. "We're old friends, ain't we, Curly?" He drew water from the well, glanced down at the horse corral, looked at Mary Roberts and at Curly Long, drank slowly. "Walk out to the road with me, Curly," he said. "I got some things I want to talk to you about. Thanks for the drink, miss."

"You're welcome," the girl answered, her voice suddenly dull.

Curly Long followed Kerr out to the road. From the kitchen window, Mary was watching them. Down at the bunkhouse a sleeping cowboy had roused himself and glanced in their direction.

"You found yourself a nice hole to lay up in," Kerr said.

"What do you want?" Curly's voice was edged with fear.

KERR rolled a cigarette. "You don't sound like you're glad to see me."

"I'm not."

"Oh," Kerr said, glancing toward the house. "So it's that way?"

"What do you want?"

"You talk like you've got religion, Curly."

"I've got something else, and I'm aiming to keep it."

"Well, that's fine," Kerr said. "You've found something for yourself, and I'm glad. I've found something for myself too, two hundred head of prime steers in a draw about a mile down that way." He jabbed his finger toward the north. "I've got a buyer for those steers, Curly, and I've got a couple of men to help me run 'em off."

"Roberts' cattle?"

"I don't know whose cattle they are, but this is the closest ranch house, so they must belong here. That's why I figured I was lucky when I rode in here to look the place over and found you rocking on the porch."

"You ain't so lucky. I'm not helping you rustle those cows."

"Oh, I wouldn't ask you to help. I know you're laid up with a bad shoulder and can't do any riding. But you can walk all right. You can walk down to the horse corral tonight and open the gate and let the horses out, and then you can walk down to the sycamore tree in that draw and tell me what you've done. Then I'll know Roberts won't be able to round up his saddle stock before noon tomorrow, by which time, I figure," Kerr went on, "we'll have those steers so far away he won't ever be able to trail them."

"Go to hell! I admit I can't stop you, but I can tell Roberts and he can stop you."

"I wouldn't do that, Curly, not if I had a little girl baking cookies for me. I just wouldn't even think about it."

"Why not? Roberts will be damned glad to be tipped off."

"And so will Captain Martin," Kerr said. "If you're not down by that sycamore tree by midnight tonight, Captain Martin will know where you are before sunup. And you can't ride fast enough to get away from him, not with that bum shoulder of yours, Curly."

"If he catches me, I'll tell him you were with me."

"I'll be in New Mexico by then," Kerr said. He swung into the saddle. "Tonight at midnight, Curly. Or tomorrow a little after sunup. Take your pick."

Loping his horse down the road, Kerr turned in the saddle, looked back and waved.

All afternoon, Curly Long sat stiff and tense in the big rocking chair on the side porch, wondering how he was going to stay both honest and alive. Mary's dog sniffed at his legs, looking for a scratch behind the ears, and he wasn't even aware that the animal was on the porch. Mary came out of the kitchen and looked at him, and he didn't see her. He kept thinking, if I tell Roberts, Kerr will tip off Captain Martin. If I turn the horses loose, I'll be as much a thief as if I helped run the cows off myself. Either way, I lose Mary. If I lose Mary, I'd just as soon be dead.

He made up his mind then. There was only one way. It wasn't much of a way, considering his condition, but it was the only way. He went into the kitchen. "I'd like to have my gun, Mary, and a piece of paper and a pen."

She was baking bread, and the kitchen was heavy with the rich fragrance of the loaves. Her face went dead white when she spoke softly. "You don't need a gun here, Curly."

"You never know when you need a gun, Mary. Could I have it? And some paper to write a letter, if you don't mind," he asked.

Her face showed that she minded, but she got the weapon for him, and a pad and envelope, and ink and a pen. He went out on the side porch and laid the gun on the floor and slid down in the big rocking chair and began to write slowly, "Dear Mary—"

He tore up the letter three times before he got it the way he wanted it. Then he wrote her name across the envelope and sealed it and put it in his pocket and picked up the gun and went for a walk. A tin can was lying beside the road. He shot at it. Dirt jumped a foot to the right, but the can did not move.

IT WAS eleven o'clock that night when he slid silently out of bed. A full moon threw a broad beam of light across the patchwork quilt on his bed. He dressed without making a sound, pulled on his socks, buckled on his gun. Carrying his boots, he slipped out the window, quietly entered the kitchen. The letter to Mary he left between the salt and pepper shakers in the middle of the kitchen table.

Outside, moonlight silvered the range. The bunkhouse, the horse corral behind it, were clearly visible. He paused for a moment beside the window of the room Mary occupied. The soft sobbing was clear and distinct. Mary, in there in the darkness, was crying.

He walked away from the house and down to the road before he put on his boots. He could feel the gun bumping his hip.

If he got back, he would remove the letter from the kitchen table and tell his story. If he didn't get back, the letter might give her courage to face her tears.

Off to the left, he heard a horse trotting. He stopped, listened. The sound died away in the distance ahead of him. He walked on. Where was that sycamore tree in the draw where Harley Kerr was waiting?

A line of brush traced the vague course of a creek running through a draw. He turned, followed the draw. There was the sycamore tree. He saw the shadows under the tree, shadows that moved, shadows that were horses and men. Harley Kerr and his two men were waiting for him. He suddenly felt very much alone in the moonlit night.

The memory of the girl crying back there in the ranch house kept his feet moving in a straight line toward the sycamore tree.

"Is that you, Curly?" a voice called.

"Yeah," he answered, walking toward the tree and the shadows.

"Did you run off the horses, Curly?" Kerr asked. There was eagerness and more than eagerness in his voice.

Curly stopped, planted both feet deliberately. "I didn't run off no horses, Harley. I came out here to run you off instead. Draw, Harley. This is me or you."

He reached for his gun.

In the shadows, he heard Kerr curse.

Then three guns roared at him. The rustlers had been waiting for him with drawn guns. His hat was suddenly gone, vanishing as if snatched off by an invisible hand. A bullet tugged at his shirt. He fired one shot and missed. Kerr spurred his horse straight at him.

"Ride him down!" he heard Kerr yell.

He could see Kerr bending over the horse's neck. The other two men were still in the shadows, but Kerr was coming straight at him. Kerr was riding like an Indian.

His shot emptied the saddle. The horse struck him, knocked him to one side, knocked the gun out of his hand, knocked him down, dazed him. But he knew that Kerr was out of the saddle, down, with a bullet in him.

The ground suddenly vibrated with the drum beats of hoofs racing down the draw from the road. And under the sycamore tree a man shouted: "It's a trap. Let's get out of here."

HOOFS thudded by Curly Long. He got slowly to his feet. The drum beat of hoofs raced up to him, stopped beside him. Jack Roberts slid out of the saddle. Four men were with the rancher. Guns covered Curly Long.

"What are you doing here?" Roberts said.

"I came out here to stop a man from rustling your cows," Curly Long said.

"You did?"

"That's a lie," Harley Kerr whispered from the ground. "He came out here and shot me to keep me—from tippin' off Captain Martin to his hidin' place. I—I spotted —him this morning—and recognized—him—"

Breath was running short for Kerr. One of the men slid to the ground, bent over Kerr, then stood up. "Man's dead," he said. He looked at Roberts. "You heard what he said?"

"I heard him, Captain," Roberts answered. The rancher's voice was as cold as the north wind.

"Captain?" Curly Long said.

"Captain Martin," Roberts said. "He's been living down at the bunkhouse and keeping an eye on you ever since he trailed you to my ranch."

"Okay, boys," Captain Martin said. "This sycamore is real handy."

The sound of ropes rattling on leather was loud in the still air.

"Why didn't you hang me the first night?" Curly Long asked. "Why did you have to wait around?"

"I would have hung you as soon as I found you except I was looking at a double-barrel shotgun," Martin said. "That gal would have killed me if I'd touched you."

"What?" Curly Long said.

"Damn!" Captain Martin exploded. "This is nothing for a woman to see."

A horse was racing toward the sycamore tree. Mary Roberts, riding bareback in her long cotton nightgown, slid the horse to a halt. She had a square of paper between her teeth and a shotgun in her hands.

"Curly?" she said.

"I'm here, Mary," Curly answered.

"I think, Miss Mary, you'd better go away," Captain Martin said.

"You're going to hang someone?"

"Yes."

"You're going to hang Curly Long?"

"Yes."

Saddle leather creaked as the horses moved. There was no other sound.

"We had a bargain," the girl began.

"Which has been kept," the captain said. "I agreed with you that if this man—" he pointed at Curly Long "—admitted his shady past to you and promised not to go wrong any more, I'd take a chance on him. I made this agreement at the point of a shotgun and because you're a woman. But I made it, and I would have kept it, if he had done his part. Now I'm asking you: Has he done his part, has he admitted he was a rustler?"

"Not with his mouth. Once I thought he was going to, but he didn't."

Captain Martin shrugged. "So you see."

"He couldn't tell me," the girl said. "There was something he had to do first."

"As what?"

"This letter tells. Dad, if you will strike a match—"

By the light of the match, she read the letter aloud:

"Dear Mary:

I love you and I want to ask you to marry me. But before you make up your mind what you want to do, I want you to know that Captain Martin put the bullet in me that you dug out, and that I'm wanted, for rustling. I know, dear Mary, if you say yes, there will never be another rustling job for me, not with your sweet face and your sweet spirit to guide me home.

Now I got to go out and see a man who is stopping me from coming to you, a man who is trying to make me help him rustle your daddy's cattle. There is only one way to stop this man, dear Mary, which is why I had to have my gun. I'm leaving this letter so you will know what was in my heart, if I don't come back.

I'm hoping I'll come back.

With all my love,

Curly."

As she finished the letter, Curly Long could hear the sob in her voice, and he knew how much the letter meant to her.

"I think Curly had kept our bargain for us," Mary Roberts chokingly spoke. "He told me of his own free will. I didn't tell him what to say, I didn't even hint to him."

CAPTAIN MARTIN shifted his feet. "A man died saying Curly Long had killed him to keep him from tipping me off. And every one of us heard him."

"Then he lied, for that wasn't the only reason."

"Men don't usually die with lies on their lips."

"They can die with them as easily as they can live with them. But I'm not lying."

She shifted the shotgun so that its muzzle pointed toward this Association agent. The hammers clicked as she drew them back.

"I can kill you, Captain Martin," she said. "Curly Long came out here tonight to kill a man, so he would be free to come to me. I'll kill another man, if I have to, to be free to go to him."

"Mary!" Curly heard his choked voice whisper. "Mary, no!"

"I mean it," she answered, her voice as choked and as desperate as his.

Captain Martin sighed. "She means it, and I know she means it. And that convinces me." He was shaking his head and saying. "Go along, you two. Go along together."

They went along together, side by side, walking away from the sycamore tree in the west Texas draw, walking away in the moonlight, walking away forever.

Coming in the next issue

WORTH A GAMBLE

A Gripping Novelette of a Girl in Trouble

By DOROTHY L. BONAR

LADIES' CHOICE

A Short Story of Some Gals Who Aimed to Scare Off Cowboys

By S. OMAR BARKER

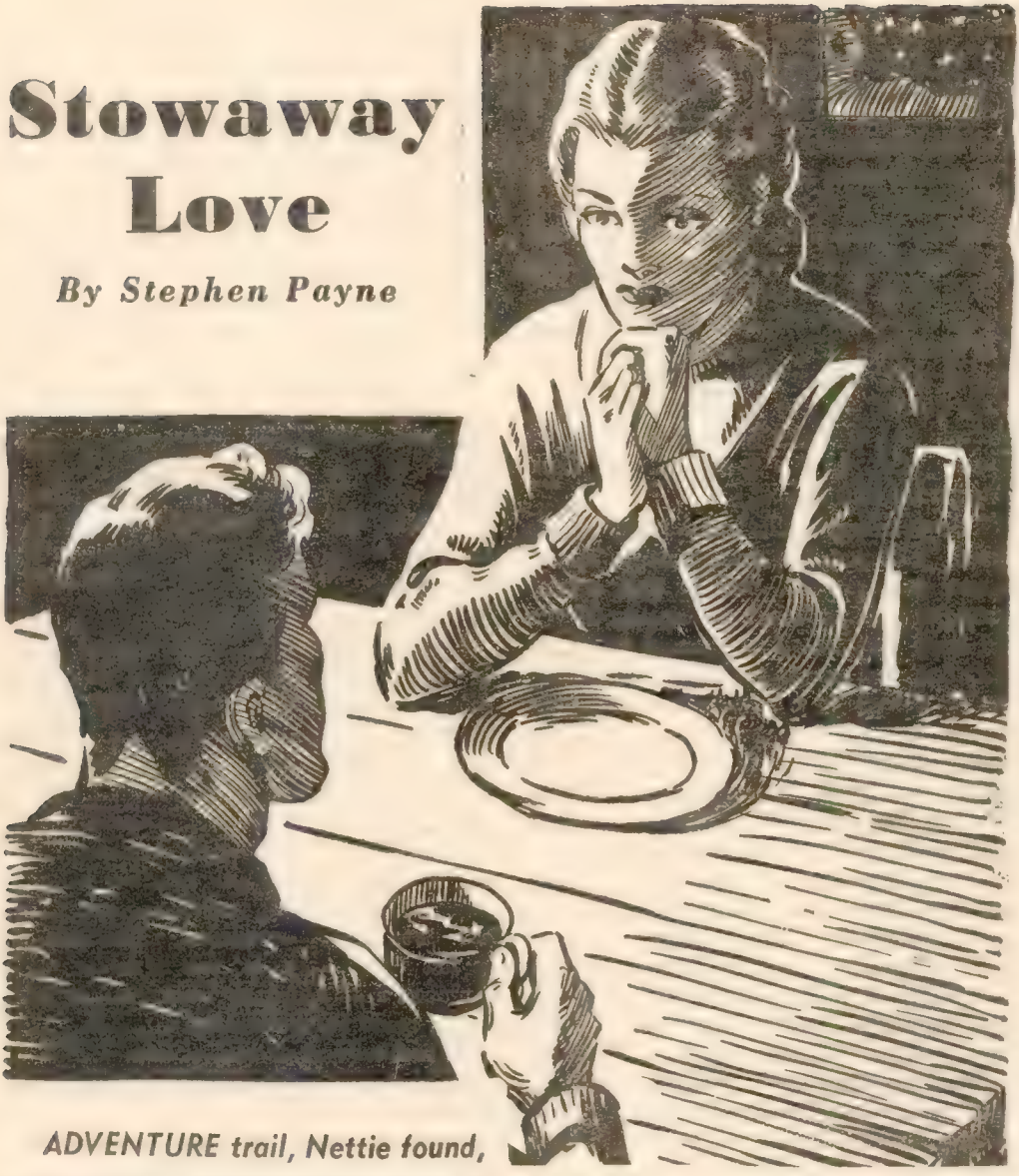
THE COWBOY COOK

A True Tale of the Cow Country's Most Popular Man

By EVELYN JEAN McCARTY

Stowaway Love

By Stephen Payne



ADVENTURE trail, Nettie found, was hazardous to follow with a coward

LARRY O'DAY was hitching eight horses to a three-wagon freight outfit by lantern light when the hostler helping him said, "I reckon you heard how Dad Connor and Mrs. Connor put Nettie on the ten o'clock train last night. They're sendin' her to an aunt back East for to break up her match with Andrew Gill."

Larry kept right on fastening snaps and hooking traces, but his lean, young face, weathered by sun and wind and storms, tightened.

Freddie, the hostler, rattled on, "Nobody here in Dagget likes Gill, though a lot of folks play up to him 'cause he's the big frog in Silver Lake and has plenty of dough. . . . Owns this freight outfit, don't he, Larry?"

Larry said briefly, "Yes."

There was no point in telling Freddie

that last June, when Larry had taken the job of skinning this long team over the treacherous mountain road from Dagget to Silver Lake, Gill had promised to sell him the wagons and the horses. But, with one excuse after another, Gill had put off the transfer of the outfit until now Larry faced the dreary prospect of finding himself snowbound for the winter at Silver Lake.

Yet even if he had owned the outfit, Larry would have felt duty bound to make this final trip. His two lead wagons were loaded with food which would be desperately needed by the hundred-odd people, women and children as well as men, of Silver Lake, to see them through their long period of isolation.

The garrulous hostler had not finished his news. "Gill owns the store, boardin' house, saloon and gamblin' hall in that minin' camp, so p'rhaps 'tain't no wonder Nettie fell hard for 'im. I've knowed her ever since her dad moved to Dagget and hung out his shingle as a law sharp. He'd gone busted on a dry homestead out on the plains, where Nettie and her ma never had nothin' but grief. If I was Nettie maybe I'd feel like grabbin' a rich ol' tinhorn myself, though her folks is agin'—"

Larry interrupted tersely, "The mistake her folks made was sending her to visit her Uncle George in Silver Lake last spring."

"You said it! George Connor couldn't do nothin' with her and she kicked plumb over the traces. You was there some of the time, Larry. Did she stand the town on its head like they say? When her dad did wake up, he drug her back to Dagget, and now he's even hustled her East. . . . Is it true, Larry, that Gill cut you out with Nettie like he did everybody else?"

The teamster had picked up the lines and climbed to his high seat. He spoke to his team, and as the horses leaned against their cold collars he called, "Dry up and blow away, Freddie. Maybe I'll not see you again till next spring. And will that be a relief!"

Nine-Mile Canyon soon swallowed the long team, and the rumbling thunder of steel tires on frozen ground sent its racket echoing through the dark and frosty air. Preoccupied, Larry did not hear it.

Silver Lake had Nettie Connor tagged as a born flirt, tantalizing and undependable. Therefore, sober reflection should have convinced Larry O'Day she wasn't really worth serious consideration. He was angry with himself because now, as in the past, such reflections failed to convince him.

Still nursing the hurt Nettie had given him last summer when she had deliberately stood him up in favor of Andrew Gill, he hadn't been at the depot to see her off. But he was glad Nettie's parents had moved to spike her romance with Gill.

Tied up by his business interests in Silver Lake, Andrew Gill would not hear from Nettie, or even hear about her, for at least six months. The stage had stopped running last week; this was definitely the last time Larry's freight outfit would travel this wicked road. From now on there'd not be even snowshoe mail delivery.

Daylight had come hours before Larry O'Day topped out on the crest of the frontal mountain range, and other distant ranges, wrinkled and awesome, were still to be negotiated. In softer seasons this near-timberline land of stunted spruce and grassy parks, frowning cliffs and twinkling, glacier-fed lakes, was savagely beautiful. Today it was only savage, with low-hanging storm clouds blotting out distant bald peaks and even closer landmarks. The stillness in the thin, sharp air was a threat more ominous than shrieking wind. But at least Larry could be thankful the impending blizzard had held off as long as this.

When an ice-locked creek cut across the rutted road, his team halted of one accord, four of the intelligent horses turning their heads to look back at their driver and whinny softly. Larry said, "Okay, boys!" as if he were speaking to human friends, and, springing to the ground, he ran back to the third wagon to get his axe and a water pail.

This light vehicle, unsuited for heavy freight, he called his trailer. Like a prairie schooner, it was fitted with bows and a canvas top, and in it Larry carried grain and nose-bags for his horses, a bedroll and grub box for his own use if necessary, extra clothing, and all manner of odds and ends he might need.

As he loosened the canvas at the rear of the trailer, every muscle in Larry's body abruptly stiffened, and his wide brown eyes narrowed to a fixed stare at a human shape in the dimness of the wagon bed.

"Come out of it!" he ordered harshly.

A girl's voice answered, "You needn't be so cross about it, Larry." It was the laughing voice of Nettie Connor!

Only the oval of her face was visible, yet the woolen scarf which covered her hair and ears and throat did not entirely conceal Nettie's vivid brunette beauty. In the ensuing moment of Larry's stunned silence he saw clearly the flashing dark eyes and the enchanting smile which, added to indefinable radiance, endowed this girl with rare and indescribable charm.

"I'm so cramped in here, I will get out for a minute," she said, as calmly as if being discovered stowing away in his freight wagon was quite the ordinary thing. Struggling through the clutter in the wagon bed, she jumped to the ground. "Don't look so darned distressed and angry, Larry. You'll make Dorsey's before dark, won't you?" Dorsey's road ranch was the only stopping place between Dagget and Silver Lake.

"Maybe I will," Larry growled. "But you're in for a twelve-mile hike back to Dagget. Start walking!" The words lashed at her like the crack of his long whip.

Nettie showed neither anger nor dismay. "Don't kid yourself, skinner! I'm not walking anywhere."

"When you stagger into Dagget, go straight home and—"

She put a mittened hand firmly against his lips. "Don't be silly and don't get bossy, Larry. I'm going with you to Silver Lake, understand? Why'd you stop here?"

"To water my horses."

Disturbed as never before in his twenty-four years, Larry grabbed his axe and one water bucket. He stalked to the creek, and with savage axe strokes ripped out a hole in the thin ice. Dipping up a bucket of water, he moved to his off-wheeler and slipped the bit from the horse's mouth before he let it drink from his lifted pail.

To his astonishment, Nettie had picked up another pail and began to help him. "I like horses, too," she explained, her eyes soft.

"Gill hates 'em, and he'll never savvy 'em," Larry muttered, just to be saying something.

He could not compel the girl to walk, nor could he spare the time to take her home and he reckoned that Nettie darned well knew it. But what to do?

Suddenly he felt as Nettie's doddering old mining uncle must have last summer—bewildered and helpless by Nettie's flaming youth, vitality and self-assurance.

She was now saying gaily, "I've heard the desert holds a fascination that gets under your skin. That's the way Silver Lake has got hold of me. Not only the little lake, shut in by the big, bearish mountains and blankets of wild flowers all around it, but the dreamy little village itself. It's the most beautifully romantic spot in the world. I love it!"

"Humph!" snorted Larry. "Pretty in summer, I grant you. But in winter, snow neck-deep to a tall redskin, one blizzard after another, months below-zero."

"Why, I love those wild storms. To see them come sweeping out of the clouds is fascinating and thrilling. Even the frightening power of them is something wonderful."

" 'Power of them!' " Larry repeated, and cocked an appraising eye at the clouds, hemming in team and wagons and two human figures in a land where even wild life had been frightened into taking cover. "I reckon you'll learn what a mountain blizzard's like, long before we get to Dorsey's. Maybe we won't get past there, either."

Nettie's lovely dark eyes betrayed faint alarm. "Oh, but we must! I know how all those people who live in Silver Lake are depending on you to bring them this load of food. Let's go! I'll ride up front with you." She seized his water pail, picked up his axe and walked back to put them in the trailer.

Larry sucked in a deep breath and shrugged. The only thing I can do is put off the showdown until we reach Dorsey's place, he thought, and believing that the road ranch owner would help him with this

terrific responsibility, he nodded with satisfaction. Although Dorsey, who lived alone, had told Larry that before he got snowbound he was planning to trek south to another mining camp, Larry would persuade the man to take Nettie home—by force, if necessary!

It was black night, snow falling steadily, when at long last the outfit turned in at the road ranch. To Larry's dismay no welcoming light shone out through the windows of the big log house, no smell of wood smoke hung on the air, and no dog barked an uncertain welcome. There was only the forlorn silence of deserted buildings. And with a sickening hollowness in his stomach, Larry realized that Dorsey, frightened by the storm threat, had already pulled out.

On the long drive the two had somewhat loosened up toward one another, chatting about this and that, while ignoring memories of the past which were holding them definitely far apart. Larry had been enjoying Nettie, who possessed a sparkling, radiant vitality that continually amazed him. But now, he reckoned, this deserted ranch would really get her down. She'd be as helpless and demanding as a tenderfoot, as rebellious and temperamental as a balky mule.

Maneuvering his team up alongside the stable to take advantage of its shelter, he made the ironical comment, "This, too, is a beautifully romantic spot, Nettie."

"Phooie!" Nettie retorted. "I'm not scared even if there is nobody here. Help me down, Larry."

He lifted his arms, and when she dropped into them he held her bundled figure more closely than was necessary. A wild tingling running over him disturbed his calm in a manner new and strange and rather enjoyable—until he recalled that she was Andrew Gill's sweetheart.

"Stamp your feet and clap your hands to warm up," he advised, beginning to unhitch the horses. He expected a petulant protest, a demand to be taken to the house and a fire started for her. But Nettie merely asked, "Where are your lanterns?"

"In the trailer. Light a couple and hang 'em in the barn where they'll do the most good."

Nettie got the lanterns, and when the eight horses were stalled, she helped to unharness them. With a sense of foreboding, Larry looked at the meager pile of hay in the mow. Barely enough for tonight, and no more to be had short of Silver Lake, still thirty miles away.

He filled the mangers, blew out one lantern and took up the other. "Come on, Nettie."

She followed as he went to the trailer, shouldered his grub box and broke a trail through six inches of snow to the dark and silent house. Inside, they had shelter from the fury of the storm, but Dorsey had taken most of his possessions, and had left woodboxes for the kitchen stove and main room fireplace empty.

To Larry it seemed so dismal and forlorn that he looked at the girl with quizzical sharpness, to observe her reactions. She gave him a slow, reassuring smile. "If you'll rustle wood, we'll soon have it nice and cozy. I hope there's food in your grub box. I was never as hungry."

Silently, Larry plodded back to his trailer, lighted another lantern and got his axe, only to discover that Dorsey's woodpile also was a minus quantity. Dorsey was the kind who provided nothing more than was absolutely essential. He had known Larry would be making this last trip, and had left enough hay for just one night. But his supply of wood had been figured a mite too fine!

Larry muttered his disgust, waded to the corral adjacent to the stable, knocked loose three poles and hacked them up. Again surprising him, Nettie came out and carried in two armloads of wood, and when he lugged in the last of it, she had the fires started.

She had taken off her heavy wraps, and in red sweater and green skirt, with her shining black hair knotted low on the back of her slender neck, she made an eye-arresting picture. Larry found himself pausing often as they prepared a meal, just to look at her.

After they had eaten their supper, the girl said thoughtfully, "There are some crummy old bedsteads with hay mattresses in this barn of a house, but no bedding."

"I'll lug in my bedroll and you can use it, Nettie."

"But where'll you sleep? You've got to have rest too, Larry, for tomorrow's trip's going to be something to tell my grandchildren about."

"I'll make out." He tipped his head to one side to survey her with frank wonderment. "To tell your grandchildren? Do you think this is some grand adventure you can later brag about?"

"Of course," laughing at him. "My own grandmother—on mother's side, for the Connors are really pretty wishy-washy—gambler, with an eye for the ladies. And he has been around!"

Larry experienced regret that he himself had never been wild, maybe even a long rider. To Nettie there was nothing fascinating about him because he was known to be "steady," sort of like a reliable horse. Nor was he rich like Gill, though he did have eighteen hundred dollars in his pockets, hard-earned money carefully hoarded to buy this freight outfit, which Andrew Gill had welshed on his promise to sell to him.

"I'll look after the horses, and bring the bed in," he said and went outdoors quickly.

"Pete ain't bein' hung. He's just havin' a tooth pulled."

crossed the plains in a covered wagon. . . . I couldn't stand going East where I'm sure I'd have been bored to death. Until now nothing exciting has ever happened to me. . . . On that plains homestead of ours I'd dream of being a pirate or a bandit, and I always hoped I'd actually meet one of the wild bunch riders. He'd be dashing and romantic, so different from the stodgy young farmers I'd seen."

"Andrew Gill's interesting and romantic, is he, Nettie?" Larry asked.

"Oh, yes he is!" with sparkling animation. "He's not a bandit, of course, but people say he's wild and reckless and a

When he had watered and fed the eight animals by lantern light, he looked them over with eyes as critical as those of a mother for her children. "I'm sure going to ask a powerful lot of you fellows tomorrow," he told them.

The fury of the storm had increased by the time he wallowed back to the house with his heavy bed roll. As he closed the door and dropped his burden in the main room, he saw that Nettie was not alone. A tall, big-shouldered man, wearing a beautiful coyote skin overcoat, was with her, and she was eagerly helping to loosen the buttons of his coat. Andrew Gill!

Andrew Gill had canny blue eyes in a rugged face which somehow appealed to women, possibly because it was so definitely masculine. His sharply-arched nose, tight-lipped mouth, high cheekbones and jutting chin added to its impression of ruggedness and virility.

"This damnable storm came up before I could get away from Silver Lake," said Andrew, shrugging off his coat, "and the only horse I could hire to ride gave out long ago. I've been bucking storm and drifts on foot!" He laughed. "Quite a trip!"

"I still can't get over the surprise of seeing you, Andrew!" Nettie returned. "You didn't know—you couldn't have known—I was on my way to join you."

"I had no idea you'd be here," Gill replied. "In fact, I'm leaving Silver Lake. I've sold all my interests there. I decided I'd go East too and meet you there."

"But you should have sent me word!"

To Larry it seemed as if the girl was annoyed. Gill patted her shoulder with possessive familiarity. "I'm ripe for fresh fields, Nettie. We'll find adventure and excitement in the East. This wild country is no place for a woman. Nor for a man either. We'll get out of Dagget without seeing your folks, and we'll spend the winter in the South."

Nettie's expression was one of surprise and disappointment. "But you don't understand! I love Silver Lake."

"You're an odd one, Nettie. Nine hundred out of a thousand girls would hate and fear that snow-hole. But I'll show you more wonderful places than you ever dreamed of. . . . Why, hello, Larry! Thanks for taking care of Nettie—though I guess you didn't exactly want to bring her up here!"

Larry shrugged. "Nettie does a good job of taking care of herself. . . . How far up-trail did you leave that horse?"

"What's it matter?" Gill said aggressively.

"Can't let the pony stay out all night in this storm, perhaps to freeze."

"The sooner that counterfeit plug freezes, the better! It's been storming since you made your last trip, Larry, yet the snow wasn't much above the beast's knees and he shouldn't have let me down. . . . Wait! Where're you going?"

"To get that horse," said Larry. He saw Nettie's bright glance flash from him to Gill and back again, lingering on his face.

Gill snapped, "You're still working for me, remember. Now get this—Nettie and I can't take chances of getting snowbound at this forsaken place. Leave your heavy wagons here, hook your team to the light one and take us to Dagget."

Larry's eyes met Andrew Gill's. "You darned well know I won't do it. And you know why, too." Jerking open the door, he went out.

Gill's angry voice came after him. "I know why you say you won't do it. But already you're cut off from Silver Lake. It's useless, it's even madness to try to get the wagons through."

The teamster didn't answer.

At the stable he led out Rowdy, his off-leader, swung up bareback and pointed the horse up the trail. Now he was away from the protection of the buildings, he immediately discovered that it was a hellish night, one when even the coyotes would hunt their holes. Yet the dogged stubbornness that lay in Larry O'Day would not let him turn back without the horse Gill had abandoned.

Hours later, when he did return to Dorsey's ranch, he was leading Gill's horse. Weary, beaten down by the storm, and half-frozen, Larry lighted a lantern in the stable, stalled Rowdy and the other animal, and then stared in disbelief at the emptiness of two stalls which had housed four of his horses. Plunging out into the night, he ran to the freight wagons. The trailer had been uncoupled and, like the two teams, was gone.

Belatedly, Larry realized how completely panicked Gill had become due to his fear of being snowbound. Yet, although anger was a hot flame in him, the teamster took a minute to consider this new problem calmly. If Gill had the sense to let the teams pick their own way and set their own pace, they would hold to the road and Larry would have little chance of overtaking the man.

But Gill's abuse of the saddle pony had shown that he had no understanding of horses. If he had permitted that pony to rest often and had not crowded it beyond its endurance in the deep snow, the horse would have brought him safely to Dorsey's ranch. Now that he was driving a four-horse team, Gill was sure to think he knew more than the horses, and he'd quite soon become hopelessly lost.

Leading out Rowdy's mate, a trim bay mare named Becky, Larry mounted and headed toward Dagget. A mile or so along, Becky came to a full stop. Sliding off her back, Larry discovered signs that here the team and wagon had left the road, yet it took an hour of frantic searching before he found the outfit at the foot of a bluff, helplessly stranded in a snarl of down timber.

"Larry?" Nettie's voice greeted his approach. "Oh, Larry, we're lost!"

"Confounded stupid horses wouldn't stay on the road," exploded Gill. "Larry, old man, you're a teamster. Which I'm not. Can't you take us on to Dagget?"

"I can. But I won't." Larry was grim. "If you've crippled one of these horses, Gill, I think I'll kill you!"

"Not concerned about me?" Gill complained. "Or even about Nettie? Concerned only for the damned horses."

Silence followed, but when at length Larry had maneuvered the outfit back to the road Gill spoke again. "I'm the owner of the freight outfit, Larry, and my order to you is to take the wagons and teams to Dagget."

"You can't mean that, Gill! Silver Lake needs those loads of grub."

"Let's clear that up," Gill returned. "I sold my store to Jim Monson, but I didn't include these last two wagon loads of supplies. I told Monson the stuff would not be delivered."

Larry wished he could see Nettie's face so he might try to figure out what she was thinking about all of this. For his part, he was sure Gill was lying, to try to convince Larry that his duty was to his employer and not to the people of Silver Lake.

Gill went on, "Don't be pig-headed. I've already told you that you can't possibly buck the snow to Silver Lake. At daybreak we'll head for Dagget, and that's that!"

Larry drove the light wagon into the road ranch, pulled up near the loaded freight wagons and stepped to the ground. "Gill, I don't give a damn if you do own this outfit. I'm taking it on to Silver Lake."

Andrew Gill leaped from the wagon and faced the teamster with clenched fists. Larry expected him to fight, but suddenly he dropped his hands and said, "You've wanted to buy the outfit, Larry. Now, I'll give you a bill of sale for it, and it won't cost you one dollar, if you'll take Nettie and me to Dagget."

A bill of sale for the outfit! Larry was as still as if the storm had frozen him, his mind turning over a thought. Could he pull the trailer to Dagget, then return to this road ranch and still deliver the loads of food to Silver Lake?

The answer flamed in his mind like a bright light. A delay of forty-eight hours in these mountains, with the road already nearly impassable and a blizzard raging, would prove fatal.

"I'm promising nothing, Gill," he said shortly. "But go to the house and make out that bill of sale. . . . Nettie, go with him. Use my bed and get yourself some rest."

The girl, who had taken no part in the argument, obediently led the way toward the house, Gill following.

Larry grimly stalled Becky and the four other horses. He looked at his watch and was shocked to discover it was three o'clock. He must now pull out as soon as possible. As for Gill and Nettie, he'd leave them his grub box, and when this storm was over, they could reach Dagget on home-made skis.

Before Gill's appearance, Larry had had a vague idea that maybe after all he himself had a ghost of a chance with Nettie. But she must have helped Gill get the four-horse team and the trailer ready to start with him for Dagget. Nettie had done this, knowing as well as Larry how the people of Silver Lake depended upon the two wagon-loads of food!

In his black mood he watered and grained the teams and hooked the trailer in its place before he wallowed through a foot of fresh snow to the house.

Larry's bedroll was not in the front room. Neither was Nettie. But logs blazed in the fireplace, and Gill was restlessly pacing the room and listening to the shriek of the wind.

"Here's the bill of sale," he said.

Larry read the slip of paper, and opening his outer coat, shoved it into an inner pocket, from which his hand brought out a fat wallet. "Here's the price we agreed on, Gill. Eighteen hundred dollars. Count it."

Gill's head snapped up, his reckless eyes narrowing. "What's this, Larry?"

"I'm buying the outfit." He shoved the wallet into Gill's coat pocket. "Brace up, man. Sit tight here till the storm's over, and you can get to Dagget, either on foot or on skis. . . . Now I wouldn't want to hurt you. But if you try to stop me from pulling out for Silver Lake—"

He left the sentence hanging and walked from the room.

Half an hour later the wagons rolled away from Dorsey's road ranch, the pony that Larry had saved from the storm tied behind the trailer.

Larry O'Day had had a brutal night, nor had he stopped to get breakfast. In that interlude before sunrise, with the coming of daylight the blizzard slackened off temporarily and hunger and weariness beat upon him, coupled with a sense of futility and deep regret. There was really nothing he could have said or done about Andrew Gill to change Nettie's mind. But it was a miserable shame that so attractive, spirited, lovable a girl should throw her life away on that selfish cruel man. He supposed when a girl was in love with a man as handsome as Andrew, she couldn't see his faults.

His team crashed a snowdrift, breast-deep, on an upgrade. Straining like one giant unit in their harness, they dragged the wagons through, coming to a halt atop a knoll the wind had whipped bare. Larry slid from his seat and walked stiffly back to his trailer. Though his grub box had been left at Dorsey's, he'd find something he could eat.

Exactly as on the previous day, he looked through the opening in the canvas and saw Nettie Connor, bundled in his overcoat, her heavy scarf wound about her head.

His surprise lasted only a moment and then, supposing both the man and the girl had slipped into the wagon unseen, he demanded gruffly, "Where's Gill?"

Nettie stepped to the ground. "At Dorsey's, I suppose, since we left him there. . . . I'd moved your bedroll into one of the extra rooms and I told him I didn't want to be disturbed. Then I slipped out by the back door, and here I am!"

"Gill at Dorsey's, but you are here! That might mean—" Larry's tongue stumbled badly.

She was looking up at his tight face with deep seriousness in her own dark eyes, and she seemed to read his mind. "Honestly, Larry, I'm ashamed now of helping Andrew take those teams last night. He said the folks at Silver Lake had plenty to last them through the winter. And he said you were just being stodgy to keep a silly promise. It seemed exciting to drive off through the blizzard, and Andrew kept telling me about all the wonderful places he was going to take me—Cuba, South America!"

"You sure change your mind fast, Nettie. Yesterday it was Silver Lake where you wanted to be more than any place in the world, and last night it was South America. But I suppose, any place where Gill is—"

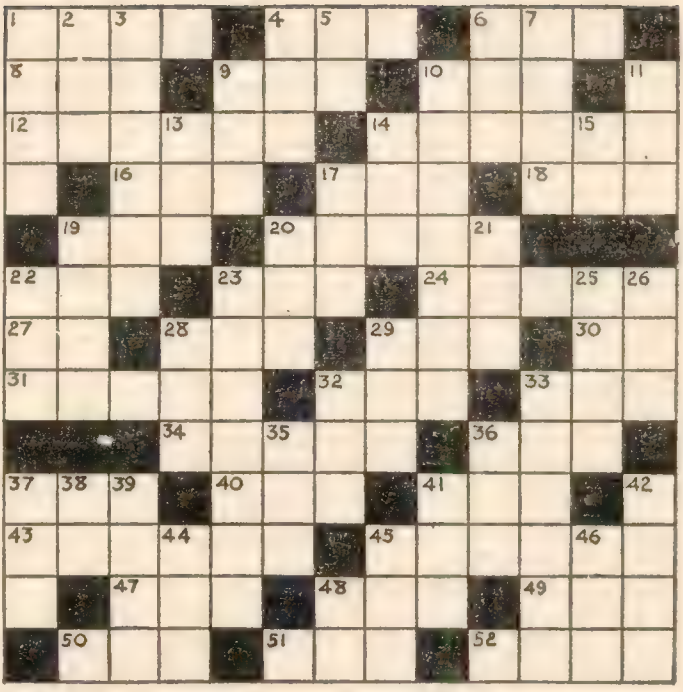
"Not any more. Today it's Silver Lake again. And it will be for always, because—because that's where you will be."

"Oh, Nettie," he said, his voice husky with emotion, "now that you're with me, nothing can stop us from winning through to Silver Lake. From there, we'll send a man on snowshoes to tell Dad and Mother Connor the news."

"It will startle them," said Nettie. "But it'll please them for a change."

Larry's tired eyes were glowing. He started to speak, but Nettie had tipped her head sideways and was challenging him with her familiar, heart-stirring smile. Larry O'Day forgot hunger and weariness and storm, he even forgot his horses, as he responded to that challenge.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



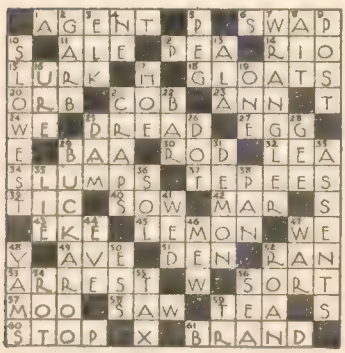
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Stake in poker
4. To ventilate
6. To make into leather
8. To contend
9. Vase with a pedestal
10. Fishing pole
12. To fight against
14. A lasso
16. Formerly
17. Storage place for grain
18. To attempt
19. Golf mound
20. Range of hills
22. Goddess of dawn
23. A mass of butter
24. To destroy by slow disintegration.
27. Near (abbrev.)
28. Foot of an animal
29. Southern constellation
30. Artificial language
31. To postpone
32. A small mule
33. Contended in a race
34. A large stock farm
36. A precious jewel
37. Likely
40. Female deer
41. Tin vessel for liquids
43. Combed wool
45. To steal cattle
47. To help
48. To disfigure
49. To consume
50. To mock
51. Barrier in a river
52. Increases the number

DOWN

1. To acknowledge
2. To pinch with the teeth
3. Indian tents
4. Exist
5. Within
6. High hill
7. Mine entrance
9. Function
10. Wardens who patrol the forests
11. Pig pen
13. Raw metal
14. A movable cover
15. Arabian (abbrev.)
17. Part of a bridle
19. Pulled apart
20. Uncooked
21. Epoch
22. To finish
23. Marched ceremoniously
25. Liquid weight measure
26. Long period of time
28. Through
29. Kind of tree
32. Playing card
33. Leased
35. To bend the head
36. Aeriform fluid
37. Division of a play
38. Father
39. Snare
41. A mongrel dog
42. Makes a wager
44. To cease to live
45. Male sheep
46. A boy
48. Mother



Solution to Second June Puzzle

Walking Horse Ranch

By James W. Routh

THE STORY SO FAR:

When DONA MALLOTTE inherits Walking Horse Ranch from her uncle, she and her friend, BONNIE ANDREWS, find that their arrival in Tonalea sets off a mysterious chain of events. First Fred Randolph, a mining engineer, is killed in the hotel corridor, and then Dona helps MARK DILKON escape through their room, before the arrival of town marshal, BEN WILLIAMS.

Dona is advised to sell the ranch to an unidentified buyer by her uncle's lawyer, BOYD KELSEY, and by Sheriff SCOTT QUINN and banker LOREN MOODY. They claim her uncle was murdered and that the ranch is haunted.

However, Dona wishes to see her property, but she and Bonnie are waylaid by ruffians, SLIM and BUD YORKE, TONY ZARAN and JAKE HALL. Dilkon arrives in time to save the girls and take Slim Yorke and Zaran to the ranch as his prisoners. The next morning Dona is informed by her caretakers, PETE and IDA ENDERS, that Dilkon and the prisoners have disappeared. Dona is worried, suspecting that the two who escaped came back to release their confederates and capture Mark.

Exploring the ranch house, Dona finds some odd bits of stone which she can't identify, and later is shot at while riding the range. That night she hears mysterious noises and shoots twice at a ghostly figure prowling the yard. Suddenly a hand closes over her throat, and she sinks into blackness.

CONCLUSION

AN HOUR before dawn that morning a tall man stumbled wearily along an alley that paralleled the main street of Tonalea. He moved as if each step required a special effort, but with the doggedness of one who will let nothing stop him. He went past Bernstein's store and the hotel and the two-story building with the outside stairway. He went past the small brick building with the barred windows and turned through a gate in a high board fence and stumbled along a path to the back door of a small frame house. The door did not open when he tried it. He went around the corner of the house farthest from the jail and found an open window. As he thrust his head through it, bed springs creaked and he spoke quietly.

"Ben! I'm comin' in."

A grunt of surprise came out of the darkness. "Mark?"

"Yeah." He eased in through the window, a tired man who nevertheless moved with agility. He pulled the window and the shade down behind him, saying, "I dunno if I'm supposed to be dead or just off on a trip, but I want them that think either way to keep on for a spell."

It was too dark in the room for either man to see the other. The bed springs creaked again as the town marshal put his feet on the floor. "You're supposed to've been kidnapped by a couple of crooks named York and Zaran. Scott Quinn's huntin' for 'em, but he says he figures you're dead by now. Where in hell have you been?"

"Scott," Mark drawled tiredly, "told the truth for once, but he was a mite optimistic when it come to drawin' conclusions." He groped his way to the bed and sank down upon the end of it with a sigh. "You named the place I've been," he went on. "I got a break and escaped, but it was a long walk back. Is Scott in town?"

"Not since day before yesterday. What's the idea of sittin' in the dark?"

"Make a light if you want. Day before yesterday, huh? That's no help. Was he alone when you saw him last?"

Williams made a light. They blinked at each other. The marshal's square face displayed astonishment. "You look plumb wore out, for a fact. . . . About Quinn—Yeah, he was alone. Got in his car an' drove out north along the highway."

Mark slumped forward with his elbows on his knees, his hands supporting his head. His body ached with a parched and hungry ache. He hadn't eaten since yesterday noon

and had had little water during that long hike across the hills. He reckoned he'd have to cut his boots off his swollen feet, and every fiber of him cried for rest. But there was something he must do, something he must find out, if he could only remember what it was.

"I'll make a pot of java," said Ben Williams, reaching for his pants. "An' fry you up some eggs. Then you better turn in an' get some sleep, cowboy."

Mark shook his head and lifted it, narrowing red-rimmed eyes at the concerned face of the town marshal. "I'll okay all them things, but first tell me this—three four days ago there was some strangers in town. Come in a tourin' car without a top. Left town around noon."

Williams scratched his chin with a rasping sound and nodded. "I saw them. Fact is, I had three of 'em locked up in jail the night before they pulled out. Disturbin' the peace in the Cattlemen's Bar. Next mornin' the fourth come along an' paid for the damages an' got 'em out. Tall slim guy—"

"Yeah," Mark murmured. "Slim York. Seen him since, Ben?"

The marshal shook his head. He'd seen York only once.

"But somebody must have," Mark said. "You do some checkin' up, will you, Ben, while I catch me a little rest? It's damn important. I want to know who York talked to while he was here in town. I want to know specially an' in particular, if he had a private confab with any of our prominent citizens."

Williams, half way into his pants, paused and stared. Then with a glimmer of understanding in his greenish grey eyes, he nodded. He might be phlegmatic but Mark, who had know him for a long time, knew that the town marshal wasn't nearly as slow as people sometimes thought him. Mark also knew how his friend felt toward Scott Quinn.

"So you got a lead at last, huh?" Williams said. "You bet I'll do some checkin'."

At that moment a last, soft glow from the darkening sky fell across her face

WHEN Dona recovered consciousness, she was lying on her bed. The room was bright with sunlight, and Bonnie was leaning over her anxiously. She tried to speak but only a whisper came out. Her mouth felt as if it was packed with evil-tasting lint, her throat ached, and her head throbbed with an agony that reached every part of her body.

"Take it easy, darling," Bonnie said. "You're going to be all right. But—oh, golly, Dona!"

Suddenly the little blonde girl's eyes flooded over, and she was on her knees beside the bed. Dona closed her own eyes and tried to remember. She lifted a heavy hand to her throat and touched wet cloths. After a moment Bonnie lifted her head and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and blew her nose.

"Sorry, darling," she said huskily. "It sort of piled up on me. My, oh, my, but you had me scared. I heard that horse and then that awful yell and ran into your room, and you were gone. Then I fell over a chair, while Ida had hysterics and Pete cussed her out. When I did get into the patio, you weren't there, either, and it was pitch dark. But I had a flashlight—I'm darned if I know how I hung on to it—and I kept on looking for you. When I found you, out near the bunkhouse, I thought—" she gulped—"I thought they'd done you in, darling. Gollee, what kind of a country is this, anyhow?"

Again Dona tried to speak, but Bonnie told her not to try. "Some gink choked you and banged you over the head. Ida swears it was the ghost that rides the walking horse, but no ghost would do a trick like that. You've got some real bruises. I've been keeping compresses on your throat. And my fingers crossed. I guess your hair saved you from a fractured skull." She blinked rapidly and blew her nose again.

Stiff and sore from head to foot, Dona was remembering now. She remembered everything up to the instant when she lost consciousness. And all at once she was more furious than she'd ever been in her life. Her anger acted as a powerful restorative. She tried again and managed to speak in a croaking voice like one suffering from laryngitis. She wanted a drink of cold water and some aspirin tablets and a hot bath.

Bonnie looked doubtful. "The bath might do you good, but if I had your throat, I wouldn't try to swallow any pills."

Dona sat up and closed her eyes and held on until the room and the bed stopped whirling in opposite directions. With Bonnie's aid, she made it to the bathroom and eased into the tub of hot water and let it soak some of the soreness out of her. Afterward she looked in the mirror at the bruises on her neck and face and, to Bonnie's amazement, swallowed two aspirin tablets with water. Then she went back to bed and drank hot coffee. An hour later she got up and dressed. Anger burned steadily within her all this time. Her head didn't ache quite as much, and she was able to talk a little more easily. If she moved carefully she got along all right.

"I know why Uncle Ed was killed, and what Fred Randolph tried to tell me," she told Bonnie.

"My, oh, my!" Bonnie exclaimed. "Was it the choking or the crack on the head that did it?"

"It was that mineral specimen we found. I put it on my dresser before supper last night, remember? It's gone now, but that doesn't matter. When I woke up—before I heard the horse—I remembered what it was. Let's have a little talk with Mrs. Enders."

They were crossing the patio when Pete Enders clumped out of the kitchen.

"Glad to see you're able to be up an' about, ma'am," he said to Dona. "Would you be goin' to Tonalea today?"

"No," Dona replied. "I would not. Why?"

"Me an' the woman is," he said flatly. "She says she won't stay another night here, an' I don't blame her."

"You mean you're walking out on us?" Bonnie asked incredulously. "You're leaving us here alone?"

"Be better off in town," he growled sullenly.

"Seems to me I've heard that one before," Bonnie murmured, glancing at Dona.

DONA looked steadily at the dour little man. He refused to meet her glance. Her angry suspicions were at a sharp edge. He could have fired the shot that had nearly killed Mark up there beyond Eagle Notch. He could have engineered the escape of Slim York and Tony Zaran, so that they could kidnap Mark. He could have fired the shot that had sliced across the rump of her pony yesterday. He could even have been mixed up in the ghost business last night, but he certainly could not have been the man who had carried her into the yard and slugged her. He wasn't big enough. It might not be possible to identify her assailant positively, but she knew that he was a big man, a powerful man.

"All right," she said quietly. "I'll not try to hold you against your will. You'll report to Mr. Moody, I suppose. I'll write a note for you to give him too."

A flicker of surprise broke through his sullen expression. "I'll deliver it," he said gruffly. "Obliged, ma'am." Then he turned and clumped away.

"I never did warm up to that little shrimp," Bonnie murmured. "But for him to walk out on us like this! Well— Oh, what about that chunk of rock? Are you going to ask the Big Wind about it?"

Dona hesitated, then shook her head. "If she knows anything about it, she'll deny it. Anyhow, I doubt if she'd know molybdenite from beans. By the way, what happened to my pistol?"

"I don't know. I heard you shoot, of course, and looked for it, but I couldn't find it. What's this—this mo-stuff, for Pete's sake?"

"Molybdenum," Dona explained, "is a rather rare metal used in making steel."

"My, oh, my!" breathed Bonnie. "The things the gal knows! Is that why somebody wants this ranch so badly?"

"It could be why Uncle Ed quarreled with Randolph. If there is a deposit of that ore nearby, developing it would bring into this valley everything Uncle Ed disliked. You remember what Mark said. I wish I knew what's become of my pistol."

"I'm going to go heeled with heavy artillery from now on," the little blonde girl said. "Unless, of course—" She stopped short, a question in her eyes.

"I'm not going to quit," Dona said quietly. "After Pete and Ida have gone we'll drive over to Mark's ranch and see if we can persuade those nice old Mexicans to come back. Then, perhaps we'd better go to Tonalea and see about hiring another foreman. Someone," she added, even more quietly, "I'll pick out myself."

"Got your Irish up, huh?" Bonnie grinned. "I'm right along with you, darling. We'll show 'em! Are you going to report the ghost business to Sheriff Quinn?"

"Perhaps," Dona murmured, "he already knows!"

Bonnie's grin vanished like slate marks before a sponge. Her eyes widened and she took a deep quick breath. "Gollee!"

Dona didn't elaborate. A vague impression was teasing her, but she could not bring it clearly into focus. If she could, she was sure it would remove all question as to the identity of her assailant.

A few minutes later she handed Pete Enders the brief note she'd written to Loren Moody, stating that Enders was leaving with her permission and that she would drive to town in a day or so to discuss hiring someone to replace him. Pete accepted the note silently and pocketed it. He looked rather shame-faced, it seemed to her. Ida tried to gush, but as Bonnie remarked after the rattletrap car had carried her and her dour little husband away, the big wind had fallen to a mere zephyr.

AND NOW, as the sound of the car faded off into the distance, Dona suddenly realized what their departure meant. The big house seemed strangely empty, filled with an almost eerie stillness. A feeling of loneliness swept over her with almost physical force. She saw that Bonnie felt it, too, but Bonnie grinned cheerfully, saying, "Who was the gink that went around with a lantern, looking for an honest man? Let's join him, darling. D'you suppose there are any such in this country?"

Dona's lips tightened at the sudden wrenching of her heart. There was one, she thought, if he still was alive. Silently

she led the way out into the yard, where the convertible stood glistening in the warm sunlight.

"If we're going to the M Bar D and then to town," Bonnie said, "we'd better put some more gas in the tank. There are some five gallon cans in the shed. Lend a hand, will you, darling?"

As she spoke she opened the door of the storage shed. Then she made a queer whimpering sound and stumbled backward. Dona turned quickly. The body of a man lay propped against the cans of gasoline. There was a small bullet hole just above the bridge of his nose and a trickle of blood had run down from it and dried in an ugly brownish streak.

"Gollee!" whispered Bonnie. "Dona—he's dead! It—it's—oh, I've got to get out of here!"

Turning, she stumbled around the corner of the shed and was sick. Dona managed to get the shed door shut. She walked over to the convertible and sat down on the running board, her mind blank, shivering in the warm sunlight. It was quite a while before Bonnie came and sat beside her. They didn't look at each other. They looked straight ahead at nothing in particular, while they seemed to be peering through that closed door at the dead man.

"We can't just sit here," Dona said presently. "We've got to do something."

"That's Slim York," Bonnie said in a queer, tight voice. "Somebody shot him—with—with a .22. The ghost—"

"Stop that!" Dona said sharply. "All we know is that he was shot through the head. We don't know if it was a .22—or—or a .25!" Suddenly she choked a little and gripped Bonnie's hand. "I shot twice at whoever was playing ghost. Do you suppose—"

"Of course not," Bonnie said promptly. And then she asked, her voice again queer and tight, "What are we going to do?"

For one who usually was so pertly self-confident, so quick in her reactions, she seemed strangely slow now to react from the shock of their horrible discovery. It was Dona, normally the more emotional, who proved the stronger.

"We got gas before we left Tonalea. Is there enough in the car to get us back? If not, we'll have to waste time by driving to the M Bar D to borrow some."

Her steadiness steadied Bonnie, who immediately hopped up and checked the gas gauge and the speedometer. "Not enough for both trips," she reported. "But we should make it to town all right. Gollee, darling, let's get going!"

They went into the house, packed a few necessities in their overnight bags and were ready to start. Dona steeled herself, made sure the storage shed door was tightly closed and locked the padlock through the hasp, putting the key into her purse. Bonnie, meantime, got into the car and stepped on the starter. It growled, but the motor didn't start.

"What's the matter?" Dona asked.

BONNIE shook her head and tried again. She kept on trying without result for several minutes. Then she got out and opened the hood. After a moment she straightened and looked at Dona.

"Somebody," she said tightly, "meant for us to stay here, darling. The distributor head is gone."

Dona gasped and hurried around to look for herself. For a moment she was close to panic. Everything that had happened since the night they reached Tonalea piled up and integrated into a fearsome pattern.

"But why?" she whispered, staring at Bonnie. "Why do this?" Then after a moment, she said, "We'll get horses. We'll ride out and find some of the cowboys."

"Any live man would be an improvement," Bonnie agreed.

They went back into the house to change to riding clothes, and then out to the corrals, which were a hundred yards or so back of the ranch buildings and not clearly visible until they got past the bunkhouse. Bonnie who was a little ahead of Dona, stopped abruptly.

"Who said horses?"

The gate of the horse corral was open. There wasn't a horse in sight. For a moment Dona could only stare, while the full significance of it sank in. Cold fingers touched her between the shoulders.

"You were right the first time," she said

unsteadily, "Someone intends to keep us here. And I think I know why."

"If I could get my hands on that Pete Enders about now," said Bonnie, "I'd make that fat wife of his a widow."

"There's no need to stand here. We've got a long wait ahead of us. I'm sorry I got you into this, Bonnie."

"You didn't," Bonnie retorted promptly. "Coming with you was my idea. Gollee, suppose you'd come alone!"

IT WAS nearly noon. They went back to the house, made coffee and prepared a meal which they forced themselves to eat. Realization that they had to wait where they were until someone came made each of them assume a false cheerfulness which wore thin as the wait lengthened. The picture of the dead man in the storage shed kept forcing its way into their minds. The thought that they might have to spend the night alone in the big empty house was a growing horror that edged and tightened their nerves. Bonnie did her best, but her chatter was spasmodic. She opened the piano, only to stop playing almost as soon as she began. Dona found herself straining her ears for sounds that were not real. She found herself watching the road toward Eagle Notch as the long hours dragged past.

"The softening up process," she said once angrily. "We mustn't let it get us, Bonnie. It's all been cleverly planned—fiendishly planned! But I'm not going to be scared into doing what I don't want to do." Her lips tightened and after a moment she added, "I wish I could be sure I hadn't killed him. I did shoot at something—twice."

"You had a perfect right," Bonnie said stoutly. And then, suddenly thoughtful, she asked. "Did you say twice? That's queer. I'm sure I heard three shots."

"If I could be sure of that!" Dona shook her head wearily. "But it doesn't matter, I suppose. I thought I only shot twice, but it might have been three times. And if I killed a man—" She shuddered, knowing that if she had, no matter how justified her act might have been, it would haunt her always. More than anything else it would influence her to sell Walking Horse Ranch, for the memory would always be fresh as long as she remained there.

It was late in the afternoon when, from the front porch, she saw a car coming down the steep descent from the Notch. A moment later she saw a second car following close behind. Her momentary relief gave way abruptly to a surge of sickening fear that made her gasp and sway.

"Hold everything, darling!" Bonnie cried, moving quickly to slip an arm about her. "Gollee, this is no time to do a flop."

"I know," she murmured. "I'll be all right."

"Chin up," said Bonnie, hugging her. "The show must go on. You're playing the lead, darling."

Resolutely Dona pulled herself together. By the time the first car had rolled to a stop she was outwardly cool and composed. With Bonnie beside her she stood at the top of the steps as Sheriff Quinn got out and came toward them, moving with the easy swiftness that seemed so odd in such a big man. The second car braked to a stop directly behind his dusty sedan, and from it stepped Loren Moody and Boyd Kelsey.

"That's just dandy, darling," Bonnie murmured. "You've got a lawyer and a banker right on the job to bail you out if the big ape arrests you!"

If the flippancy didn't ring true, it did indicate that Bonnie was much more able to cope with living men than with dead ones. Scott Quinn touched his hat and spoke gruffly, his unblinking yellow eyes on Dona's white face.

"Hear you had some trouble last night. Come to check up."

"Yes, my dear," said Loren Moody. "When Enders gave me your note and told me what had occurred. I consulted with Boyd and we decided that the sheriff should investigate. Unfortunately, Scott wasn't immediately available or we would have been here earlier."

Kelsey came and took Dona's hand in both of his. "I'm terribly sorry anything like this should have happened, Dona."

But not sorry enough, Dona thought, to hurry out here. She pulled her hand away quickly and moved back a little. She looked

at Moody. "Did Pete Enders give you the distributor head from Bonnie's car?" And then to Quinn, she said, "Your investigation should start with the dead man we found in the gasoline storage shed after Pete and Ida left this morning. If you'll come this way, I'll show you."

QUINN'S hard, sunburned face remained expressionless. Her glance shifted quickly to the other two men. It seemed to her that her announcement had startled them, but she turned immediately and led the way through the house, pausing only to get the key from her purse. When they reached the shed, she handed the key to Quinn. He stared down at her for an instant, then wheeled to open the door.

After a brief look, he grunted and went into the shed. Dona didn't want to look, but she made herself watch him. He leaned over the body, touched it, grunted again and stooped to pick up something that apparently lay on the ground behind it. His big hand concealed the object, but a band of fear jerked tight about Dona's throat as intuition told her what it was. Bonnie's fingers tightened on her arm. Neither Moody nor Kelsey seemed at all curious, they stood a little apart, saying nothing. Quinn came out of the shed and closed the door.

"Know him, do you?" he asked Dona.

"He was one of the men who stopped us on our way to the ranch the other day," Dona told him quietly. "One of the two who escaped that night. He called himself Slim York."

Quinn's unblinking stare was upon her, but she could tell nothing of his thoughts. "Shot through the head," he said. "With a small caliber bullet. Could of come out of this."

Abruptly he thrust his hand before her. In it lay her automatic pistol. She had known it, of course, but nevertheless she recoiled and Bonnie's arm went around her quickly. Then she stiffened, lifted her chin and met Quinn's yellow eyes squarely.

"It could have," she admitted. "I fired two shots at whoever played ghost last night."

"But I heard a third shot," Bonnie said. "And even if she did shoot him, it was self-defense. That York was a crook. He had no business—"

"Let her tell it," Quinn interrupted roughly.

"Why not go inside, Scott?" Kelsey asked. "Miss Mallotte has had a trying experience. It isn't necessary to keep her standing out here. Furthermore, as her attorney, I shall advise her to tell the exact truth, but not to allow herself to be tricked by your questions into saying anything that might be used against her."

"Now there," Bonnie burst out indignantly, "is as fine a bit of double-talk as I've ever heard! You keep your nose out of this, mister. Dona isn't in need of any advice from you!"

"Never mind," Dona put in quietly. "I have nothing to conceal, Sheriff Quinn. I'll tell you exactly what happened, but I would like to sit down inside, if you don't mind."

They trouped back into the house where the living room was bright with the golden glow of approaching sunset. And there Dona related what had occurred, exactly as she remembered it, including how she and Bonnie had discovered York's body, the missing distributor cap and the empty horse corral. Quinn listened without interrupting. Once when Kelsey started to say something, a gesture from the sheriff silenced him. Loren Moody, looking very sober and banker-like, said "Ah!" a couple of times. Bonnie held fast to Dona's hand, as they sat together on the big sofa, and completed the tale by explaining how she had found Dona lying unconscious out in the yard near the bunkhouse.

For a long moment then it was very still in the big room. The whole house seemed to be listening. Dona breathed unsteadily and was aware of the rapid thumping of her heart, the stiffness of her muscles, the chill that spread through the whole of her, making her shiver and clamp her teeth together. The horror seemed to have been magnified by the telling. And when Moody broke the silence with a blunt statement, it was almost as if he'd struck her in the stomach with his fist.

LOOKS like you killed him. It makes no difference if you fired two shots or three. The autopsy will indicate whether the bullet came from your gun."

Dona pressed her fingers against her eyes and Bonnie's arm tightened about her.

"Regrettable," said Loren Moody, with a shake of his head. "Even if justified—as it undoubtedly was—it will leave a bad memory, my dear. Your uncle—and Randolph—and now this."

Dona lowered her hands slowly and looked at him. He pursed his lips and wagged his head again. His blue eyes were not twinkling; they were very shrewd and calculating. There was no kindness in them, no sympathy. A shudder shook her.

"So," she said, "you think I should sell Walking Horse Ranch, and go away. Mr. Kelsey's anonymous buyer—" Her breath caught sharply, and she half rose to her feet. "You know who that is, don't you, Mr. Moody? And you know there's a molybdenite here, of course, because Fred Randolph—Mr. Kelsey's old fraternity brother—got drunk and talked too much. Which one of you," she asked, "murdered—" Suddenly her throat closed up and the anger that had blazed within her was washed out beneath a fresh wave of horror. For suddenly she remembered the feeling of revulsion, of loathing, that had come to her when the hand clapped across her mouth last night. She had felt exactly the same way when Boyd Kelsey had attempted to take her into his arms.

"Ah!" Moody said softly. "A clever girl. Beautiful girls should never be clever, my dear. Cleverness is dangerous."

He stood up, and in standing seemed to gain stature. No longer was he a jolly, likeable little man. There was a sinister quality about him that dwarfed even the hard toughness of Scott Quinn and made Kelsey seem innocuous.

"Beautiful, clever and stubborn," he went on. "You warned us that you were stubborn, didn't you?" He chuckled, rocking a little on his heels. "But we underestimated you. Or perhaps it was your beauty that blinded us. Boyd, in particular. He wanted to marry you, my dear. At least you shall be spared that!"

Kelsey leaned forward, his almost handsome face white, but a glance from the little man checked him. Scott Quinn was standing now, his face as unreadable as ever, looking across the room toward the open front door through which spilled the red glow of sunset. Moody pushed his lips out and pulled them in and nodded slowly.

"Yes, you shall be spared that, my dear. The means will be found to repair Miss Andrews' car. You and she will start for Tonalea very soon. But unfortunately you will not arrive there. I am, you see, clairvoyant. A hazardous road—an accident—Ah! What a pity! Two such lovely and charming young women—" He wagged his head and sighed.

"Why, you pot-bellied little devil!" gasped Bonnie. "And I thought you were cute!"

Scott Quinn, moving swiftly and silently, was almost at the door which opened onto the porch. Awareness of him came suddenly to Dona. Her head turned, a tingling raced along her spine, and her heart seemed to stop its beating. Quinn stopped, too, abruptly. He stopped and whirled with the speed of a startled cat, his hand dipping toward his holstered gun.

"Don't try it, Scott!" said a deep, quiet voice.

FOR ONE startled instant Dona was completely numb. Then her head jerked around and she stumbled to her feet with a cry. A tall man in dusty range clothes, his lean face black with unshaven beard and lined by fatigue, stood just inside the door that led onto the patio gallery. There was a gun in his hand and his grey eyes were gleaming slits.

"It ain't a bit of use," he went on almost gently. "It's been a long crooked trail, but this is the end of it. I ain't alone. If you looked behind you, Scott, you'd see Ben Williams. There's more, too. We've got your cars—an' we've got you three prime skunks!"

Not one of the three prime skunks moved or seemed even to breathe. Scott Quinn stood slightly crouched, his hand inches above the grip of his gun, his unblinking yellow eyes steady upon Mark's stern face.

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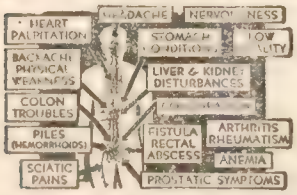

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Boyd Kelsey, half out of his chair, seemed frozen in that position. There was a shocked and stricken look upon his handsome face.

Loren Moody, motionless too, said "Ah!" softly, like a sigh. Then he pursed his lips and shook his head and said, "You seem to have jumped to an erroneous conclusion about something, Dilkon."

"I ain't been jumpin' lately," Mark interrupted dryly. "It was a long walk back from where Slim York left me an' his three pals. That was your mistake, Loren. Doin' business with a stranger. Folks notice such things, an' remember 'em."

Dona was breathing again and her heart was pounding madly. She was no longer numb and incredulous. She was keenly alive and observant. She saw Scott Quinn straighten and relax. She saw Kelsey ease back into his chair without, however, losing either his stricken look or much of the tension that gripped him. She saw Ben Williams, his square, honest face very stern, standing in the door behind Quinn with a gun in his hand. But it was Loren Moody who held the greater part of her attention. The little man listened carefully to what Mark said, then shook his head.

"I don't understand you, Dilkon," he said. "Slim York was shot and killed last night by Miss Mallotte when he apparently broke into the house for some unknown purpose. But I had no—ah—dealings with him. In fact, I do not recall ever having seen the man alive."

He spoke calmly, convincingly. He looked again the mild and friendly man who might be a successful salesman. But Dona noticed that Mark did not seem to be impressed.

"That's queer," he drawled thoughtfully. "You see, Slim told me he was goin' to talk business with his boss. An' when he got to town that night, it was you he went to see, Loren."

"You must be mistaken," Moody said quietly. "I tell you—"

"Yeah," Mark interrupted. "You told me. But you see, Slim was smarter, mebbe, than you reckoned. Or mebbe somebody you trusted crossed you up, Loren. Be-

cause when Slim couldn't locate Boyd the other night, he asked Grampaw Fellers where you lived."

Watching alertly, Dona saw the paunchy little man stiffen slightly. There was a moment of complete silence in the room. Through it drifted quiet sounds from outside the house, footsteps, the murmur of a man's voice, the scratch of a match. And then, beside her Bonnie spoke up brightly.

"My, oh, my! It does sound as if you'd been doublecrossed, Mr. Moody."

MOODY'S about-face was the fastest Dona had ever seen. Metal glinted in his hand as he turned. Boyd Kelsey's chair crashed backward as the lawyer sprang to his feet with a frantic "No! No!" that ended with the thunder of gunshots that shook the house. Kelsey staggered, slumped to his knees, fell slowly forward on his face, a long barreled revolver falling from his hand. An instant later came another blast and the thud of another fall as Loren Moody pitched headlong almost on top of the man he'd killed.

And then a strange thing happened. Scott Quinn, gripping a smoking gun, stalked across the room to where the two men lay. For a moment he stared down at them. When he turned, a scream choked in Dona's throat and she was on her feet, between him and the tall man who stood in the patio door. Facing Quinn, she stumbled backward. His unblinking yellow eyes were upon her, his hard face an expressionless mask for what went on within his mind. Mark's hands touched her shoulders, drew her back against him.

"You got somethin' there, Dilkon," Quinn said gruffly. "Hold onto it."

Only then did she notice that he had holstered his gun. By this time the room was full of men, but he did not seem to realize it, and none of them went near him as he again turned and stooped and picked up the long barreled gun that had fallen from Kelsey's hand. He looked at it briefly, turned with it in his hand.

"Your .22," he said to Mark. "There's your killer."

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Carelessly he tossed the gun onto the sofa, wheeled deliberately and walked toward the front door. Men moved aside to let him pass. He loomed against the blood-red glow of the sunset, a square and solid bulk. Then he was gone.

Half an hour later, Dona found herself alone with Mark on the wide porch, watching dusk creep across the valley. Some of the men who had come out from Tonalea were on their way back, but Ben Williams and one other were staying at the ranch until morning. Bonnie, at her blithesome best, had put Ben to work peeling potatoes for supper, while the other man split kindling and brought in firewood. Sounds of laughter lifted through the evening stillness, but Dona felt oddly ill at ease. She was much too disturbingly aware of the man beside her. Her heart was behaving strangely, almost suffocating her at one moment, beating like crazy the next. She wanted to touch this silent man, to reassure herself that he was really there, yet she dared not, because a wild and tender yearning deep within her frightened her.

"What will be done about Scott Quinn?" she asked.

"Well, now," Mark murmured, "I shouldn't worry about him, ma'am. It ain't likely he'll ever show up here again."

"But wasn't he an—an accessory or something? And he did kill Mr. Moody."

Mark was silent for a moment and her awareness of him made her breathless.

"I reckon no jury would find him guilty of murder," he said at last, quietly. "Moody was the head crook, and Kelsey stole my gun an'—used it. No, ma'am, Scott might of been playin' along with them up to a point, but I reckon he kept within limits." Then, he turned a little and looked down at her and even in the dusk she could see the way his eyes warmed and softened, and now her heart was beating like a wild thing trying to escape from a trap. "It's all over now, ma'am," he went on gently. "Thing for you to do is hurry up an' forget it."

She took a quick breath. "But I killed—"

"No," he said. "I reckon not. Of course I'm no sawbones, but I'm willin' to gamble the autopsy will prove two things. First, he was shot with my .22 gun. Second, he's been dead two or mebbe three days. So you can forget about that, too. You won't sell this ranch, will you, ma'am?"

Looking up at him, she shook her head, and then she looked away from him. "No. I want to stay here—always."

She felt the warmth of his gaze upon her, but she would not let herself look at him But all at once he reached out and lifted her to her feet beside him. He touched her chin and tilted it, and at that moment a last soft glow from the darkening sky fell across her face.

"Dona!" he murmured. "Dona, you're the loveliest thing that ever lived!"

"Do you—really think so, Mark?" she whispered. "It never—mattered—until this minute!"

And then she felt his arms close about her and went into them, standing on tiptoe to meet his kiss.

The End

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 39

1. By tattooing them inside their ears. Also by branding on the horn. Aluminum tags clipped on the ear are often used on young calves for temporary identification.

2. Bear of any species.

3. 80 to 100 sheep per day.

4. You could probably name 100 just as easily: St. Charles, Idaho; St. Helena, Calif. and Nebr.; Saint Jo, Texas; St. Peter, Mont.; San Francisco, Calif.; Santa Rosa, N. M. and Calif.; San Simón, Ariz.; Santa Barbara, Calif.; San Angelo, Tex.; San Antonio, Tex. and N. M.; San Pablo, Calif. and Colo., etc.

5. Kansas.

6. Button, yipper, door-knob, pistol, whistle, yearling, colt, nubbin, kid, hen wrangler, apron-stringer, rusty, fuzz-chin, etc.

7. 5 to 6 feet.

8. Boots.

9. Lightbread.

10. (1) U Cross, (2) X Two Bar X, (3) Revolving H, also Snake on a Railroad Track, and often just Damfino, because it was hard to name.

TEX SHERMAN, who for many years has been conducting *Out of the Chutes* in RANCH ROMANCES, tells us that the pressure of business no longer gives him time for the job. From now on, therefore, our rodeo column will be conducted by the editorial staff of the magazine, and we plan to keep the news coming to you fast and up-to-the-minute.

We shall all miss Tex, both readers and editors, but we wish him plenty of luck. He has promised to keep in touch with us, and we'll let you know about his doings from time to time.

Hot-off-the-griddle news for this issue is the coming of the California Rodeo which takes place in Salinas from June 19th through the 22nd. It's offering the largest purses ever given at a four-day show—$2,000 each for saddle bronc-riding, bareback bronc-riding, bull-riding, bulldogging, calf-roping and team roping; $1,000 for wild-cow-milking; $800 for the wild horse race. And the $100 entry fees are being added to the purse.

Entries for this rodeo close on June 9th. You hands who plan to compete in it and haven't yet sent in your entry, better hurry and get in touch with Fred McCarger, secretary of the California Rodeo, at 505 S. Main St., Salinas, Calif.

The publicity for this rodeo is big stuff—large posters on the backs of all the Clark Bros.' motor trucks and all the vehicles of the Coast Line Truck Service. That makes over 100 trucks carrying California Rodeo posters throughout California, Arizona and New Mexico.

The Cowboy Ass'n of America—known as the CAA—has developed a benefit fund for CAA members who are injured while participating in any CAA-okayed rodeo. The organization will pay up to $50 for such an injury, and can pay for two such injuries in any one year. Injuries in non-CAA shows pay up to $25. They're able to pay more for CAA shows because they can keep a closer supervision there. CAA is a non-profit organization for rodeo contestants with aims similar to the Rodeo Cowboys Ass'n—the improvement of rodeo conditions from the contestants' point of view.

The third annual Sheriff's Posse Rodeo is scheduled up at Roseburg, Ore., for June 21st and 22nd, with two performances each day. They're paying $500 for each of the six major events. Gene Payne will announce, and the boys will be pitched against Christiansen Bros.' stock. All entries close on June 20th. Contestants should get in touch with the Sheriff's Office, Roseburg, Ore.

A big event in rodeo was the Elks' annual Helldorado at Las Vegas, Nevada, in May. There was $3,400 for the cowboys to shoot at in the six major events, and an additional $1,000 for a special event—a cutting horse contest.

Speaking of special events, they had them galore at the rodeo at Escalon, Calif., on May 3rd and 4th. Besides the usual contests they put on a race for boys and girls under 15, a pony race for kids under 12, a quarter-mile stock horse race, a half-mile free-for-all, and a pony express.

As this issue reaches you one of the big shows of the year will just be over—the Bakersfield, Calif., rodeo put on by the Calif. Highway Patrolmen's Club of Kern Co. It's too soon for news of it to have reached us yet, but we hope it did plenty of business, for it's given for the benefit of the Patrolmen's Widows and Orphans Fund.

Be back with more news in the next issue... —*The Editors*

EDITOR'S NOTE: This page is composed of original cartoons, verse or prose pertaining to the West and written by amateurs only. For each contribution published we pay $2.00, and more than one contribution may be submitted by any person. Each contribution MUST be the original work of the person submitting it. Address: The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. No submissions will be returned nor can we enter into correspondence about them.

Longing

IT WAS not a sunset
But the colors were there,
For the parched prairie stretching before me
Was red and gold everywhere.

There with my horse on the stony grey cliffs
I was content—though sand stung my eyes.
I liked to watch the wind whip the grass
Into rolling waves that seemed to billow and rise.

I could almost smell the clean dry air—
The air of fall.
Yet I was ten thousand miles from the West,
Just looking at a picture on the wall.

Gene Morris, Corvallis, Mont.

The Outlaw Bride

BACK about 1910 a young Easterner whose first name was Tom had trouble with his wife's people. After a family row he secretly left home for the Southwest and landed in West Texas where he soon learned to like the country and people. Yet he couldn't forget his young wife, for they had really loved each other until relatives started meddling. His pride kept him from returning home or even writing to her. He did, however, write his brother but bound him to secrecy. One day he received a letter from his brother saying that Tom's wife was going to California to spend the winter and would probably pass through the little town near which Tom worked.

Immediately Tom explained his troubles to the sheriff, and somewhat dubiously the old lawman made him a deputy. Then for two weeks Tom met every westbound train, supposedly searching for an outlaw on the loose. The train crews accepted his explanation, but were somewhat startled one night when he aroused a young woman from her sleep and brusquely ordered "Come on, young lady, you're going with me."

The conductor came forward angrily, "Now listen, young man, this girl is not a criminal. She—"

He stopped suddenly with wide-eyed surprise when the girl jumped up to throw her arms around the deputy's neck and whispered, "Tom! Sweetheart!" Then they started kissing and crying, and the old conductor was dabbing at his eyes as the couple left the train.

She stayed in the country to help raise several sons and daughters and make their ranch into a beautiful, prosperous place. Then a few years ago she continued her California trip, which had been so happily interrupted thirty years before. But this time her husband went with her.

Dale Blair, Big Spring, Tex.

Old Whiskers

THERE'S a feller, old and feeble,
Livin' up in Squatter's Row.
Guess he's been there 'bout a century,
Watchin' people came and go.

Used to watch me, patient fellow,
When I had a trick to show.
Taught me how to do it better,
Told me: better take it slow.

If I'd 'a' listened to his teachin'
I'd be ridin' Westward Ho!
'Stead of waitin' for a hangin'
In tomorrow's sunrise glow!

Waldo T. Boyd, W. Des Moines, Ia.

Rangeland Cheer

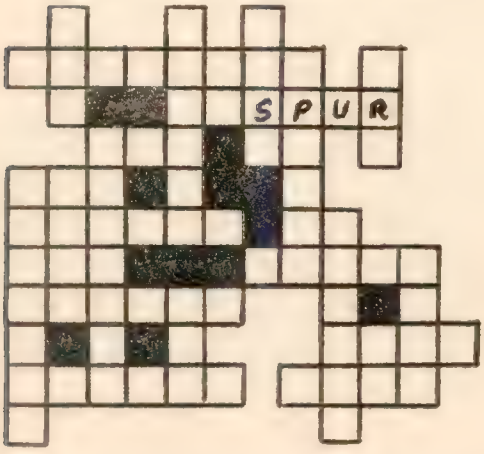
MINE are the white-faced cattle that graze,
The far-reaching cactus lands;
Herds that stampede, go loosened and wild,
Swept on with the caravans.

O mine is the long trail, the hard trail,
The undaunted, roundup run.
Mine is a sweep that leads far between
Clouds of thunder and the sun.

Mine is the sound of homing voices
From a cheerful bunkhouse near.
Mine are the songs that the cowboys sing,
Rangeland echoes, rangeland cheer.

G. S. Gleason, Fort Devens, Mass.

A Western Fill-In Puzzle



Clues: Listed below are several Western names and expressions that belong to the West. Starting with "spur" see if you can fill in the other words. They all interlock.

2 Letter Words

or as

3 Letter Words

ace nab
bar dia
rio ore
mit ram

4 Letter Words

bunk goat
spur peso
iris soak

5 Letter Words

adios shady

6 Letter Words

arroyo sixgun
corral spread
cowboy

7 Letter Word
norther

8 Letter Word
sawbones

Virginia B. Weddle, Durango, Colo.

The Tough Guy

FOLKS call me Tough McDougle
In the town of Risteree.
But when you've heard my story
Maybe you won't agree.
Men hide when I come walkin'
An' all the ladies faint.
I might be tough with humans
But with animals I ain't.

One night I heard a scratchin'
An' a whinin' at my door.
I set my ear to listen
If'n I heard it any more.
I heard it once, I heard it twice
An' heard it once again.
The night was dark an' stormy
An' a-comin' down with rain.

I kicked the door wide open
To see what I could see.
I seen the ugliest houn' dawg
A-lookin' back at me.
I scratched my head, a-thinkin'
Just what I aimed to do,
An' blamed if that there critter
Ain't a-scratchin' too.

I set down on a chair nearby
An' he set next to me,
Right at home an' stayin'
As far as I could see.
Looked like I had a pardner
If'n I axed for one or not.
He sure thought he belonged there,
For he jumped upon my cot.

Didn't have the heart to chase him,
So I lay down on the floor.
He kep' me wakeful half the night
Lord, how he could snore!
So he's in bed and I am out.
What would folks think of me?
Would they call me Tough McDougle
In the town of Risteree?

I went out the next day
An' bought another bed.
That floor sure ain't the best place
For a man to lay his head.
My boarder ain't a-aimin'
To ever part from me.
But—they call me Tough McDougle
In the town of Risteree!

P. Simonsen, New Orleans, La.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names.

Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Gene Knows the Mail Man

Dear Editor:

I've tried before so many times to get into Our Air Mail that I've run out of fingers counting. I'm an ex-navy man recently discharged after serving four years. I am living now in a small town in California and I know not a person here but the mail man. I have plenty of spare time for writing, almost twenty four hours of it, time out for eating and sleeping, of course. I am 21 years old, 5 ft. 10 in. tall, light brown wavy hair, blue eyes. Would love to hear from anyone from 14 to 114. Will exchange snapshots, and to the first ones to write I'll send pictures of action on Okinawa. Please hurry and fill my mail box.

D. E. LENNOX (GENE)

General Delivery
Lindsay, Calif.

Call From a Cattleman

Dear Editor:

I have been a Double R reader for sixteen years. I am 5 ft. 6 in. tall, dark eyes and hair, and am 27 years old. This is my first plea for pen pals. Please don't let me down. I spend most of my time with cattle on the range. All outdoor life is my sport. I promise to answer all letters as I'm alone most of the time and I do love to write. So please, don't let a poor lonely boy down. I'll be waiting.

ELDRED F. REDFERN

RR 1, Box 76
Butte, Mont.

To Everybody Everywhere

Dear Editor:

This is the third time I've tried to make the Our Air Mail Page and no success. I've spent some time in the army and overseas in Lybia and Egypt. I would like to hear from some servicemen who were in France, North and South Africa and Hawaii and the Philippines, some who might have some rare collections from these countries. I will answer all letters I receive. Would also like to hear of Chinese people. I can tell you something about the countries I was in. I am 41 years of age, have brown hair, and blue eyes, am 5 ft. 10 in. tall, and weigh 180 lbs. I was disabled overseas and have spent some time in two different V.A. hospitals.

ALBERT H. WALL

Box 207
Coldwater, Kans.

Show Joe We're Not Fakes

Dear Editor:

I've written to Our Air Mail several times but never accomplished anything. I've also written to some boys and girls and haven't heard a word. I will try again to show me that you're not fakes. I would like to have pen pals from all over the states and any other country as far as that goes, for I have traveled over quite a few with Uncle Sam as my guide. I'm 22 years young, 5 ft. 11 in. brown eyes and black wavy hair and kinda dark complexion. My hobbies are many and so are my sports, but there are a few that I like better than the rest—bowling, swimming, dancing and horseback riding. So come on, boys, and you girls most of all, get some ink and sling it down to a guy in the Air Corps. I'll sling some back.

Pfc. JOE W. ARMSTRONG—RA 34706279
Sqdn. 5-2-3505th AAF Base Unit
Scott Field, Illinois

Helen Will Pass in a Crowd

Dear Editor:

I have written over 50 letters to pen pals but only a few have answered. I am 18, 5 ft. 5 in., have light brown hair, hazel eyes. I'm no beauty but I guess I will pass in a crowd. The only thing I care very much about is writing letters, and anyone who writes to me will receive an answer immediately. That's a promise.

HELEN BULHAK

48 Manning Ave.
Toronto, Ont.
Canada

Fifth Try for Jerry . . .

Dear Editor:

This is my fifth try. Will it find the waste paper basket too? I'm six feet, brown hair and eyes, and 30 years old. I've seen so many things the last four years that I want to forget that I accepted a job as a country school teacher to be able to slow down a bit. My job leaves much time for other activities, and as there are none I'd like to have pen pals from everywhere. The first ten answers will receive a snapshot, and I promise to answer all letters.

JERRY CASEY

Blanchard, Okla.

Southpaw Hillbilly

Dear Editor:

What are the chances for a tall, southpaw hillbilly to get her letter published in RANCH ROMANCES? I am 5 ft. 8 in. tall, 19 years of age. I have always been athletic, liking basketball best of all games. I like to bowl, and I am a camera fan with a scrapbook full of photographs. I would like to hear from young girls and boys all over the world. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

ELINOR L. HARDMAN

Sta. C
Clarksburg, W. Va.

A Fan in Trinidad

Dear Editor:

I have read your magazine and have enjoyed same very much. I should be very pleased if you would be able to print my name on the pen pal column. I am 15 years of age and would reply to all letters.

BHARAT RAMNANAN

7 Sutton Street
San Fernando
Trinidad, B. W. I.

Guitar Owners Please Note

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 15. I have been crippled most of my life and in a wheel chair a lot, as I am at present. I would like to hear from new friends as I love to make friends, and I will try to answer what letters I can. I will exchange songs with anyone and I have many more hobbies. My desire is to play an electric guitar, but never could get one being a poor girl. I would like to hear from anyone.

ROSEMARY EMERICK

507 W. Fourth St.
Beardstown, Ill.

Want to Bet?

Dear Editor:

I have a complaint. I've tried many times to write to people and as yet I've received no answers. Everybody who writes to me can bet on an answer. I'm a young fellow of 22 and served three years in the army, two of them in Europe. I'm 5 ft. 8 in. and have black hair.

EUGENE J. RITTEL

Route 2
Rigby, Idaho

Texas Joe

Dear Editor:

I am 19 years old, 6 ft. 1 in. tall, have black (slightly wavy) hair, grey eyes, and weigh about 160 pounds. I live in a small town in which we raise cattle, sheep and goats. We also have oil wells around in the county. I have played a few sports but am interested in just about all of them. I also like to dance very much and am considered pretty fair at it. I do not know much about writing but will do my best to tell all about myself and the country, and at the present time I have plenty of leisure to write so please, all girls and boys, I would like to know all about places all over the world. I prefer ages from about 16 to 21.

JOE CORBELL

Box T-313
Ozona, Tex.

A Good Neighbor

Dear Editor:

Would you do me the kind favor of finding me a pen pal by means of your wonderful magazine? My age is 16 and I have fair hair and blue eyes and am 5 ft. 7 in. tall. My hobbies are all sorts of sports, dancing, movies, and jazz music.

ROSEMARIE HILDRED

San Lorenzo 1349
Olivos F. C. C. A.
Buenos Aires, Argentina

From Frosty Yellowknife

Dear Editor:

I should very much like to join your pen club, and hope to hear from people all over the world from the age of ten to a hundred. I'm 23 years old and have grey-green eyes and dark brown hair, 5 ft. 8 in. tall and weigh 167. I am a diamond driller way up in this frosty old town of Yellowknife N.W.T., so will have some really newsy letters to write if any one is interested. So please write one and write all. Every letter will be a treat to me. Will answer all letters pronto.

W. HARRY YURKEWICH

Yellowknife
North West Territories
Canada

A Mother Needs Cheering

Dear Editor:

May a sad and very lonely mother enter a plea for pen pals in Our Air Mail? I am just recovering from the shock of my son's death. He had served 3 years in the United States Navy. I am shut in the most of the time and get so very lonely. I am a widow, 55 years old and would be happy to hear from anyone that would write to cheer up a lonely heart. I will try and answer all the letters I receive. I have read RANCH ROMANCES for about 4 years. I am from the far West myself—Lebanon, Oregon. I was born there, and lived there until 1913, when I came to Montana. I yonder if RANCH ROMANCES has any readers in Lebanon, Oregon?

INA B. SCHMIDT

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515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

OUR AIR MAIL

His Weakness—Buttermilk

Dear Editor:

I will take you back and try you one more time! No, I am not singing a song, but merely trying again to crash the gates of Our Air Mail department. I will welcome letters from everyone, everywhere, will exchange photos and postcards. I would especially like to hear from anyone living in the Hawaiian Islands. I am 26 years old, 5 ft. 10 in. tall, blue eyes, brown hair and was born in Texas. I don't smoke or drink, excluding buttermilk, which is my weakness.

LARRY WINTERS

General Delivery
Anthony, N. M.

An Indian Girl

Dear Editor:

I am an Indian girl who's anxious to receive a lot of mail, so I am asking you to print my name and address in your fine RANCH ROMANCES magazine. I am 19 years old 5 ft. 7 in. in height with black hair and brown eyes. Please don't disappoint me. I'm counting on you.

CECILIA MARIE BRONCHEAU

Box 25
Nespelem, Wash.

Illinois Sportsman

Dear Editor:

I am 44 years old, 5 ft. 7 in. tall, dark hair, grey eyes, weigh 165 lbs., enjoy all outdoor sports. Also taking snapshots, interested in taking week end trips to parks, zoos, airports and other places of interest such as large lakes, enjoy fishing and hunting. Would like to hear from everyone that would like to write to me. Thanks very much.

HAROLD J. FREY

P. O. Box 1114
Decatur 80, Ill.

A Note From New Zealand

Dear Editor:

I would love to correspond with the fair sex who like exhibition dancing, acting, riding, classical music, traveling, adventure, theatre, photography. Am 25 years old, have wavy, fair hair. I hope I shall have some of you New Yorkers and Southern Belles write to me.

RONALD H. PIKE

Union St.
Waiki, North Island
Via Auckland, New Zealand

Views of U.S.A.

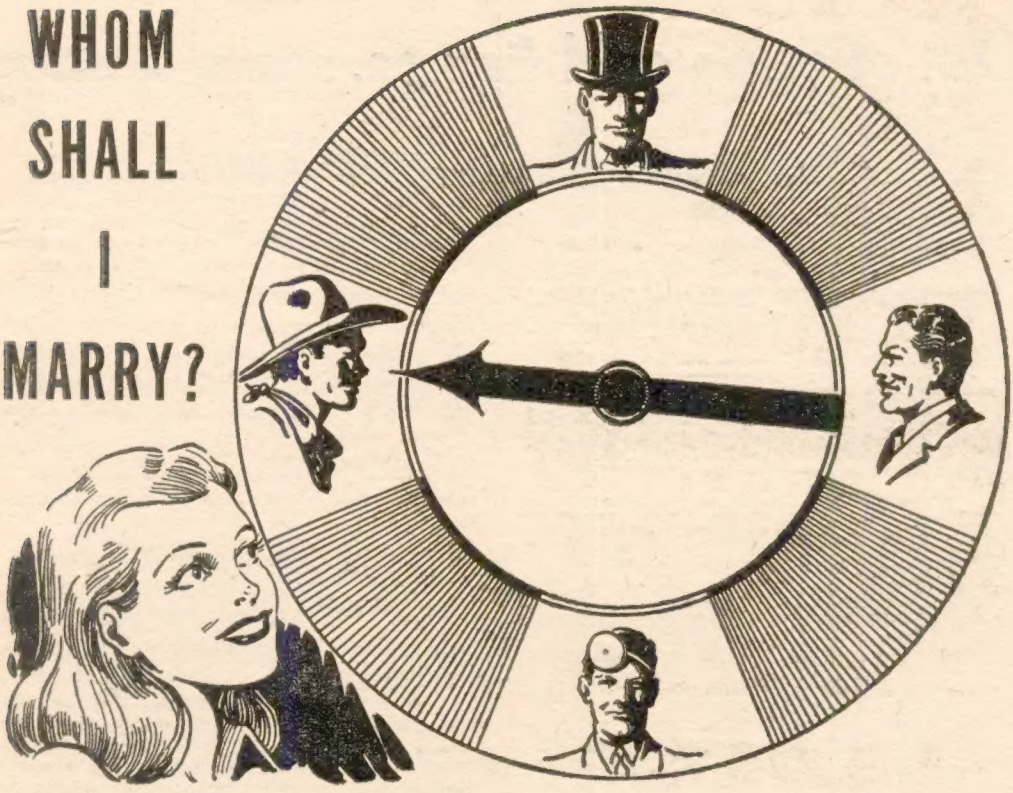
Dear Editor:

I will try again to get a letter printed in Our Air Mail. I am 27 years old, have brown hair and blue eyes. I enjoy RANCH ROMANCES very much. I play the guitar and harmonica. I would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world, and will send views of U.S.A. to all outside the country. I promise to answer all letters, so come on, anyone is welcome.

THOMAS BLAIR

Rt. 1
Loretto, Tenn.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



Girl of Cancer ***June 22—July 23***

By Professor Marcus Mari

BETWEEN LEO and Gemini lies an astral constellation known as Cancer. The word is so old that it has no modern application astrologically, but is only the ancients' idea of the shape of these stars which they thought resembled a crab with its legs extended, as if on the sea's floor. The girl born under this fourth sign of the zodiac is apt to be shy and diffident, but beneath this excessive modesty are great potentialities, real talent, and a rather amazing ability to love, to feel, to live. She is inclined to be oversensitive, even to be self-conscious. She is often an enigma to those who think they know her well. She is gentle, yet apt to say something surprising and sharp suddenly. She is very modest, but never critical or shocked, and she will toss her world upside down for her heart's sake.

Cancer star-born girls are inclined to be quiet, even self-effacing. They do not easily unbend. One must be patient with them as they do not give their friendship readily, but having given it, they are friends for life. They are loyal, utterly honest, and reliable. They have a sharp sense of their obligation to others in a material sense. They are apt to give to others only with their hands, withholding their warmth and emotion. This is because of their shyness which they must overcome in order to realize their full and fine personalities, and so that others will appreciate their real, hidden warmth.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date of Month..... 6-27-47

Out of some cold figures, came a story to warm America's heart

NOT LONG AGO, the Secretary of the United States Treasury studied a figure-covered sheet of paper.

The figures revealed a steady, powerful upswing in the sale of U. S. Savings Bonds, and an equally steady decrease in Bond redemptions.

But to the Secretary, they revealed a good deal more than that, and Mr. Snyder spoke his mind:

"After the Victory Loan, sales of U. S. Savings Bonds went down—redemptions went up. And that was only natural and human.

"It was natural and human—but it was also dangerous. For suppose this trend had continued. Suppose that, in this period of reconversion, some 80 million Americans had decided not only to stop saving, but to spend the $40 billion which they had *already* put aside in Series E, F & G Savings Bonds. The picture which *that* conjures up is not a pretty one!

"But the trend did NOT continue.

"Early last fall, the magazines of this country —nearly a thousand of them, acting together —started an advertising campaign on Bonds. This, added to the continuing support of other media and advertisers, gave the American people the facts . . . told them why it was important to buy and hold U. S. Savings Bonds.

"The figures on this sheet tell how the American people responded—and mighty good reading it makes.

"Once more, it has been clearly proved that when you give Americans the facts, you can then ask them for action—and *you'll get it!*"

What do the figures show?

On Mr. Snyder's sheet were some very interesting figures.

They showed that sales of Savings Bonds went from $494 million in last September to $519 million in October and kept climbing steadily until, in January of this year, they reached a new postwar high: **In January, 1947, Americans put nearly a billion dollars in Savings Bonds. And that trend is continuing.**

In the same way, redemptions have been going just as steadily downward. Here, too, the trend continues.

Moreover, there has been, since the first of the year, an increase not only in the volume of Bonds bought through Payroll Savings, but in the number of buyers.

How about you?

The figures show that millions of Americans have realized this fact: there is no safer, surer way on earth to get the things you want than by buying U. S. Savings Bonds regularly.

They are the safest investment in the world. Buy them regularly through the Payroll Plan, or ask your banker about the Bond-a-Month Plan.

Save the easy, automatic way—with U.S. Savings Bonds

Contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America as a public service.

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Inside back cover

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Back cover